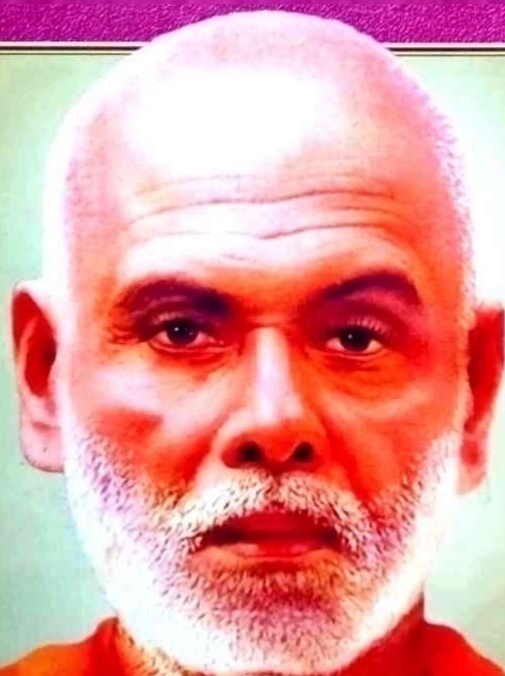


**SREE NARAYANA GURU—
THE PERFECT UNION OF
BUDDHA AND SANKARA**

SREE NARAYANA GURU

THE PERFECT UNION OF BUDDHA AND SANKARA



Asokan Vengassery Krishnan

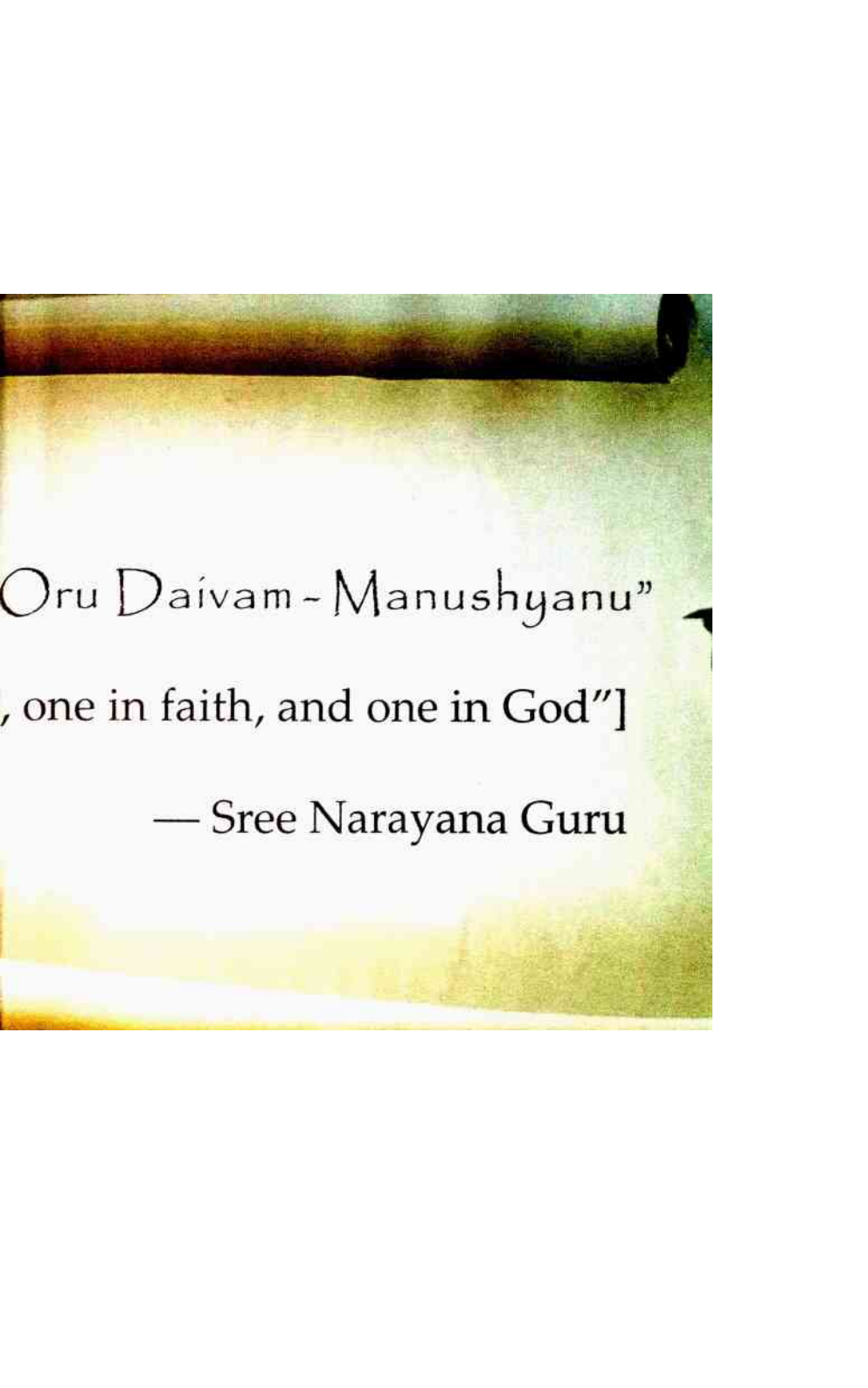
"Since the Indian constitution gives all citizens equal rights, leaving no room for discrimination on the basis of caste or creed, **it is fitting to** learn about spiritual leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, **who** rejected casteism, and promoted new values of **spiritual freedom** and social equality7—I welcome

this book."
— HH Dalai Lama .

A photograph of an open book. The left page is dark and mostly obscured by shadow. The right page is light-colored and features a quote in a serif font. The book is bound in the center, and the edges of the pages are visible. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the paper.

“Oru Jathí - Oru Matham -

[“The human race is one in kind

A photograph of a rolled-up scroll, likely made of parchment or paper, with a dark binding at the top. The scroll is unrolled to reveal text written in a black, serif font. The text is centered on the page and reads: "Oru Daivam - Manushyanu", followed by a line break and ", one in faith, and one in God"]". Below this, there is a line of text that reads "— Sree Narayana Guru". The background of the scroll is a light, aged yellowish-green color.

Oru Daivam - Manushyanu"

, one in faith, and one in God"]

— Sree Narayana Guru

Even though Advaita as a doctrine was extracted from the Upanishads by Sree Sankara, the 8th century sage and philosopher, it was Sree Narayana Guru who transformed the Advaita philosophy from an elite theoretical doctrine into a relevant principle of practical applicability. Thereby, he expanded its scope to effect phenomenal social changes, and enabled one of the most profound yet bloodless social revolution in history. As a social reformer, Sree Narayana Guru's impact was unmatched in history. Those who had been denied basic human rights for centuries were able to experience dramatic changes in their lives due to the awakening caused by Guru's teachings on self-improvement and self-empowerment. The focus on education, organization and entrepreneurship that he insisted on to secure freedom, strength and prosperity remains an ideal and timeless model for peaceful changes in the condition of suppressed and marginalized people of any society. The defining theme of his vast philosophical writings is the oneness of human race transcending all peripheral differences. His earnest call for mutual respect and understanding among all religions is a lesson that is still to be learned. The intention of this well-researched and lucidly-written book is to introduce to readers the illustrious life of the sage, Sree Narayana Guru, who emerged as the conscience of Kerala in the twentieth century.

"We earnestly pray that your holy influence may grow from more to more and by showering everywhere peace and harmony bring about a speedy solution of the many social problems of our beloved Kerala'

[Members of the Theosophical Society, December 28, 1907]

"I have been touring different parts of the world. During these travels I have had the good fortune to come into contact with several saints and rishis.

But I have frankly to admit that I have never come across one, who is spiritually greater than Swami Sree Narayana Guru of Malayalam, ay a person who is on a par with him in spiritual attainment.

I am sure I shall never forget that radiant face illuminated by the self-effulgent light of divine glory and those yogic eyes fixing their gaze on afar remote point in the distant horizon."

[Rabindranath Tagore, November 22, 1922]

"I feel it as the greatest privilege in my life to have visited the beautiful state of Travancore and to have darsan of venerable sage Sree Narayana Guru. I had the fortune to stay one day in his holy Ashram. His Excellence, the Regent Empress also spoke to me about the greatness of Guru."

[Mahatma Gandhi, March 13, 1925]

"Sree Narayana Guru was, one might say, a Jnanin of action, a grand religious intellectual, who had a keen living sense of the people and of social necessities. He has contributed greatly to the elevation of the oppressed classes in South India, and his work has been associated at a certain times with that of Gandhi."

[Romain Rolland in his book, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, published by

Advaita Ashram, Almora, 1930]

SREE NARAYANA GURU— THE PERFECT UNION OF BUDDHA AND SANKARA

A Comprehensive Biography

ASOKAN VENGASSERY KRISHNAN



Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd
New Delhi • Seattle



I am profoundly moved by the spirit of love and compassion that Narayana Guru evinced in every word and act. May all the institutions founded in his name be the living and dynamic embodiment of the master's great gospel:

*"Devoid of dividing walls
Of caste or race,
Or hatred of rival faith,
We all live here in brotherhood:
Such, know this place to be,
This model foundation."*

(Sree Narayana Guru-1888)

Maharaja Jaya Chamaraja Wodeyar Bahedur (1919-1974), the last royal ruler of the princely state of Mysore

"I am happy and privileged to come here and pay my tribute to a great man whose message is as vital and essential today as it was when he gave it."

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (On April 25, 1958 in Sivagiri)

Sree Narayana Guru's teachings and message have universal relevance at all times. In the present day world that is tom by strife, mistrust, rivalry, deceit, and intolerance, his teachings and vision have an additionally special relevance. It needed guts at the time to initiate the doctrine "One Caste, One Religion and One God". It needed vision to emphasis "Whichever the religion, it suffices if makes a better man".

Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (President of India, November 18,
2002 in Sivagiri)

"As a chela of India, I am very happy to see you uphold these great traditions of ahimsa and inter-religious harmony and respect. To come here and sit among these various religious leaders make me very happy. But as your Guru has taught, it is not enough to recite Sanskrit verses; we must reach out to the poor who need help and bring them education and health."

H.H. Dalai Lama (On November 24, 2012 in Sivagiri)

"Sree Narayana Guru's greatest idea was his unitive philosophy of 'One Caste, One Religion and One God for Man' and it is the need of the era."

Venkaiah Naidu (then Union Minister in Sivagiri on
December 31, 2014)

"One of the characteristics of our country and the society is that the process of removing the internal weaknesses and evils from our society has been going on continuously. From time to time, saints, sages and the great souls have played a significant role in expediting this process. The pious souls have spent their entire lives to liberate the society from these evils."

Sree Narayana Guru had strived to awaken the society against racism, class discrimination and communalism and to unite the society."

Sree Narayana Guruji's mantra was: Freedom through education; Strength through organization; Economic independence through industries."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi
(December 31, 2017 while addressing the 85th Sivagiri
Pilgrimage via video conference)

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Dr. Karan Singh
Chairman



AUROVILLE FOUNDATION
Ministry of H.R.D., Govt of India

Foreword

Among the many powerful Reform Movements within Hinduism that began in the 19th and 20th century, the name of Sree Narayana Guru will always stand out. Born in a family that was considered low in the social hierarchy, he became one of the most influential social reformers in South India. In 1913 he founded the Advaita Ashramam on the bank of Periyar river in Aluva, not far from Kalady where Adi Shankara was born. In his life time he founded more than sixty temples in different parts of Kerala and vigorously promoted religious and social reforms. Shrivgiri was where he consecrated an image of Sharda-the Goddess of Wisdom, and it was there that he attained mahasamadhi in 1928.

In essence, Narayana Guru's teaching was "one caste one religion and one God". He campaigned against toddy tapping and drinking, animal sacrifice and other such social evils. He wrote eloquently in Sanskrit, Malayalam and Tamil on various deities, including Shiva. I am glad that Shri A.V. Krishnan has written what is perhaps the first comprehensive biography of this great man. I am sure it will be widely welcomed by scholars and reformers in India and abroad.

Karan Singh
April 9, 2018

Message

A book that re-sanctifies the spiritual treasures that link perennial values and social concerns, in a seamless web of transcendence. Life: Upon what weft is it woven? Mr Ashokan delineates that weave integrating the we and the beyond. The deep-flowing waterways of the Atman become alive in this inspiring articulation of the life of venerable Shri Narayana Guru.

Professor Lokesh Chandra
Member of Parliament
(Rajya Sabha 1974-86)

ONE CASTE ONE RELIGION ONE GOD FOR MAN'

SREE NARAYANA DHARMA SANGHOM TRUST

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PmMantw»ml Ylaudhammda General Secretary Swami Sandrananda



na«w16-10-2017

MESSAGE

Sree Narayana Guru is a fast growing phenomenon. The life and teachings of Gurudev is a boundless source of inspiration. Many curious minds around the globe have been fascinated by Guru's wisdom. I believe that Guru's universal philosophy is a timely remedy to many of the illness confronted by the world today.

Countless biographies of Gurudev are now available in Malayalam but only a handful in the English language. I am sure, the book *Sree Narayana Guru—The Perfect Union of Buddha and Sankara: A Comprehensive Biography* written by Shri Asokan Vengassery, will stand out for its merit and intrinsic worth.

May Guru blessings be with you all.

**Swami Visudhananda
President**

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Secretary

Swami Guruprasad

Ph: 9656625307

Ref:

Date.....

BLESSINGS

I am so delighted to read this biography of Sree Narayana Gurudevan composed by Asokan Vengassery. I know personally that it took almost a decade to bring out such an informative book and I appreciate the effort, time and energy spent by Asokan Ji and the pain he undertook to bring out such a wonderful book after doing a lot of research. This book will be an asset to the future generation and the people who want to know about the life, work and teachings of Sree Narayana Gurudevan. This book is unique in its kind and different from other works on Sree Narayana Gurudevan and a true gift for posterity.

My good wishes and blessings to Mr. Asokan Vengassery for bringing out such an Informative book. May Gurudevan shower His Blessings on Asokan for this noble work.

**Swami Guruprasad
Secretary, Guru Dharma Pracharana Sabha
Sivagiri Mutt, Varkala**

Varkala, December 15, 2017

Message

The key to appreciate and revere a pathfinder is to know about his life and philosophy. I am extremely happy that a comprehensive biography of Sree Narayana Guru by Asokan Vengassery Krishnan is coming out.

This book is so skillfully written that even a glimpse into the book, one can get a picture of the multifaceted personality of the Guru. The author's flow of language and style of writing with which it is penned down is truly laudable. Such a book is the need of the hour and I have no doubt that it will be a source of inspiration to many people.

I was inspired by the inscription "Here is a model abode, where men live like brothers, bereft of prejudices of caste or the rancour of religious differences" on the wall of the temple established by Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala in 1888. It was the first such temple that was opened to everyone without any barrier whatsoever.

Sree Narayana Guru encouraged self-respect among those deemed to be of lower castes. He challenged the belief system of exclusive

divine rights to a section of society to officiate as priests and created a parallel system where he trained and appointed socially deemed lower caste people as priests.

As a Buddhist monk, my firm belief is that there is only one race and one caste in society: the human race. Some of them are educated and some are not educated; some are rich and others are poor; but all this is gained or lost over a lifetime. The poor can become rich and the rich can become poor. All people have the potential to become schooled, skilled, prosperous and enlightened. They have the potential to obtain Bodhi.

Gautama the Buddha said that in his system, caste was inconsequential. Action is the criterion that decides the real level of attainment of a person. In Buddha's immediate circle of disciples, there were hundreds of individuals belonging to what were then considered lower social categories. One of the three men who collected and edited the Buddha's teachings was Upali, who belonged to the barber caste, and another monk, Chunda, came from ironsmith caste.

Another keyword in Sree Narayana's temple inscription is "model". These days it is extremely difficult to find a model environment or a model conduct. Wherever we go, things are either too glamorous or too bizarre. Whether it is an institution, a system or an individual, there is the need of a role model. Very high, refined ideas and ideals are there to inspire us but without a model that one can look up to, these high philosophies remain empty words.

Sree Narayana Guru started a tradition of pilgrimage which became an annual event. I had the opportunity to witness and participate in the 83rd Sivagiri pilgrimage in December 2015 where hundreds of thousands of devotees and followers, all attired in yellow, thronged to the abode of Sree Narayana Guru. Also attracted to this significant event were a host of country's top political leaders starting from Narendra Modi to Sonia Gandhi to Sitaram Yachuri and others.

The Guru was contemporary of Gandhiji, and they had met each other. They had profound respect for one another, but they differed on certain issues.

The other legacy of Sree Narayana Guru is his efforts to bring about inter-religious harmony. He organized the first-ever All Religions Conference in Asia in 1924 in Aluva, Kerala. It was only the second

in the world after the first Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago, USA, in 1893. The message of Sree Narayana Gurudev to the Aluva conference was: "We meet here not to argue and win but to know and be known".

The purpose of religion is to guide us towards harmony and high realization. There is no point being obsessed by a religion just as after crossing the river by boat you go ahead on your way; you don't cling to the boat, saying "that is my boat". Sree Narayana Guru said: "Religion is a matter of the mind. Nobody should say my religion is true; all other religions are false. There is truth in every religion."

Sree Narayana's practical examples of socio-religious reforms and principle of mutual respect among all religions have made a huge influence on my thinking. I sincerely hope that a culture of mutual respect will prevail in this world that will eventually lead to human unity. I most eagerly look forward to read more of the Guru's hymns, prayers and poems.

Lama Doboom Tulku,
Tibetan monk

Message

The author has produced an amazing documentary that will be appreciated by all of his readers. His accounts are detailed and give the real life examples on how Guru educated people in order to rid the caste system in India. The book is a product of much research and careful analysis of the impact of Guru as a social reformer. The book is well written, extremely informative and contains many detailed accounts about the life of Sree Narayana Guru.

It focuses on the horrible caste tyranny emphasizing restrictions set upon the lower caste people in Kerala until the early 20th century. Well documented accounts on how Guru preached "Liberation through Education" in order to right this wrongful casting of people. The book is a wonderful account of his early days and education and his time spent as a teacher and the accounts on how people sought him out in order to obtain spiritual tranquility. His missions are well documented within these chapters. Asokan also devotes readings

about Dr Palpu, a devotee of Guru, who was instrumental in the founding of the social organization called Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) in order to spread the message of Guru against the caste system in Kerala.

In the context of the conditions in India today, the Guru's philosophy has a very strong relevance. The teachings of Sree Narayana Guru has an important relevance to meet any challenges that threaten the unity and integrity of India and its religious, linguistic, ethnic, cultural and regional diversity. India's unity and integrity can only be protected and strengthened by strengthening the bonds of commonality that run through this diversity. Guru's message is still applicable to today's society given the amount of world poverty and inequity amongst various classes worldwide.

William J. Viola
Philadelphia, PA 1910

Preface

The intention of this book is to introduce the illustrious life of the sage, Sree Narayana Guru who lived around a century ago in the southern region of India. As a spiritual master, philosopher and social revolutionary, he had a profound impact in the lives of millions of people.

Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore described Sree Narayana Guru as a sage of "unparalleled spiritual grace" after visiting him in 1922 at his ashram in Sivagiri. To Romain Rolland, the French humanist and writer, who happened to read about Sree Narayana Guru and his philosophical writings (from the articles published in the 1930s by N. Natarajan, who introduced Sree Narayana Guru to the western world), he was a "*Jnanin* in action" or sage-intellectual and activist. Mahatma Gandhi was tremendously influenced by Sree Narayana Guru's views on religion and caste. Gandhiji came to the Sivagiri Ashram in 1925 to meet the saint and they discussed a range of issues during their lengthy meeting.

As a philosopher, Sree Narayana Guru was a follower of *Advaita* which is the nectar of the Upanishads, the foundation of India's ancient wisdom. The *Advaita* doctrine establishes that individual self is not distinct from the Supreme Being Brahman. Even though *Advaita* as a doctrine was extracted from the Upanishads by Sri Shankara, the 8th century sage and philosopher, it was Sree Narayana Guru who transformed the *Advaita* philosophy from an elite theoretical doctrine into a relevant principle of practical applicability. Thereby he expanded its scope to effect phenomenal social changes, and enabled one of the most profound yet bloodless social revolution in history.

As a social reformer, Sree Narayana Guru's impact was matchless in history. Those who had been denied basic human rights for centuries were able to experience dramatic changes in their lives due to the awakening caused by Guru's teachings on self-improvement and self-empowerment. The focus on education, organization and entrepreneurship that he insisted on to secure freedom, strength and prosperity remains an ideal and timeless model for peaceful changes in the condition of suppressed and marginalized people of any society.

Sree Narayana Guru instructed people on the importance of faith in God as they navigate through the troubled waters of life. He composed many hymns and devotional prayers for the faithful so that they could lead a calm and content life. The defining theme of his vast philosophical writings is the oneness of human race transcending all peripheral differences. His earnest call for mutual respect and understanding among all religions is a lesson that is still to be learned.

In the following pages, I strive to unravel the multifaceted personality of Sree Narayana Guru as a saint, sage, *siddha*, *yogi*, socio-religious reformer, thinker, educator, philosopher, pragmatic visionary, and poet.

While writing this book, I enjoyed reading many of the available biographies on Guru, and I am immensely indebted to all the biographers and commentators of Sree Narayana Guru, in Malayalam as well as in English. Their works have been a great source of information.

I would like to add that all translations of Sree Narayana Guru's original statements, hymns, prayers and poems that are part of this book are my own, and I tried to the best of my ability to reflect its intended meaning in my translations. As I attempted to grasp the profundity of Guru's concepts, the analysis and interpretations made by scholars and *acharyas* provided me great insights. In this regard, let me express my gratitude to Professor G. Balakrishnan Nair, Dr T. Bhaskaran, Nataraja Guru, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, Swami Muni Narayana Prasad and Srimad Satchidananda Swami.

This book is the culmination of strenuous efforts during the last several years. During a time in my life when I was confronted with many serious challenges, this undertaking gave me hope and a sense of purpose. I took this self-imposed assignment as my life's mission.

I hope readers around the world would find this book informative and interesting. I wish that a new generation of biographers of Sree Narayana Guru may find this a useful resource. I wish to apologize for any lapse or shortcoming you may find in this book. May Guru bless you all!

Asokan Vengassery Krishnan

September 21, 2017

Philadelphia, USA

Aryavartham

Harippad P.O.

Alappuzha

Kerala, India

Acknowledgements

I am forever indebted to the boundless blessings of sage Sree Narayana Guru for inspiring me to carry out this assignment.

H.H. Dalai Lama, the conscience of our contemporary world and the global icon of eastern spirituality, for compassionately rendering an enlightening message, making the cover of the book so special.

Dr Karan Singh, the most revered scholar and statesman living in India today, has kindly written the Foreword, and I am humbled by his graciousness. His deep understanding of Guru and his philosophy is truly amazing.

In a few words, Professor Lokesh Chandra, author of numerous books and a former Member of Parliament, captured the essence of the book. I thank him for those mesmerizing display of words.

I sincerely thank H.H. Lama Daboom Tulku for his words of wisdom and appreciate his in-depth analysis. H.H. Lama Tulku is the author of many books in English and is a prominent figure in world

forums as a promoter of global peace. He is also a constant companion of H.H. Dalai Lama.

H.H. Visudhananda Swami, the current president of Sree Narayana Dharma Sanghom, has given a memorable message. Swami is the spiritual head of millions of followers of Sree Narayana Guru around the world, and he is a reputed scholar on Guru's philosophy. I thank him for the blissful words.

I am personally indebted to Swami Guruprasad of Sivagiri Mutt for his steadfast support and trust in me. I consider the strong spiritual bond I have created with Guruprasad Swami over the years as a special blessing. I got the rare opportunity to accompany him on many pilgrimages to the Himalayas including the one during the time of Flood in June 2013. I was also with him as we personally visited H.H. Pope Francis in March 2015 at Vatican City. Thanks for a very precious message.

My sincere appreciation also goes to William Viola of Philadelphia for taking the time to read the book. Thanks for offering a serious commentary of the book and encapsulating its theme in a few words.

My special thanks also go to Swami Asparsananda for the occasional discussions over the phone as I was writing this book, and I appreciate his meaningful insights. I would also like to thank Swami Bodhitheertha for his encouragement while listening to my brief readings of certain chapters while he was in Philadelphia during the summer of 2016.

I also need to thank a special person for his constant encouragement and support as I was writing this book. My friend P.R. Sreekumar is a serious student of Sree Narayana Guru's philosophy, and he is the custodian of many rare and useful sources on Guru's life. I admit it was his frequent inquiries that prompted me to accelerate my writing whenever I was lagging behind. Many thanks for reading the manuscript and pointing out corrections. I wish him well and pledge my support to his plan to institute a digital library to store and disseminate valuable documents available on Guru.

I would also want to thank my longtime mentor and friend Kurichy Sadan, N.N. Lalu of Kamaladalam Magazine as well as my intimate friend P.K. Sivaprasad who is the director of Sree Narayana Guru Home Study Center in Kottayam, Kerala. M.I. Damodaran,

chairman of Sree Narayana Mandira Samithi of Mumbai, deserves special mention for his support. J. Mathews, chief editor of *Janany* Magazine (USA), Professor Koshy Thalakal (writer and orator), Dr N.P. Sheila (scholar and author), Neena Panakal (novelist), George Nadavayal (journalist), P.K. Sreedharan and Lekshmi Sreedharan also deserve special mention for their warm friendship that span over decades during my life in the United States. I sincerely appreciate the words of encouragement and support of all these exceptional people. I am also thankful to the leaders and members of the Sree Narayana Association of Philadelphia for maintaining a moderate library as part of the Gurudeva Mandiram in Upper Darby (USA). I would like to acknowledge the opportunity to use some books in its collection while writing this book.

Most of the pictures that are included in the book are from the personal collection of my friend and accomplished architect Ajith Anjaneyam of Thiruvalla. The cover of the book was designed by Dushyant Parasher, and my special thanks go to him for making this book so beautiful. Let me also express my sincere appreciations to Mr. Rajikumar and Mrs Mini Rajikumar for their generosity and support in New Delhi and all the help they kindly rendered towards the publication of this book.

The enthusiastic and professional support offered by the prestigious Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, deserves special mention. Let me thank Mr Narayana Swamy of Konark for his excellent editing of my book. Priyanka Sarkar, Editor-in-chief, has been my liaison at Konark, and I appreciate her patience as well as professionalism. I am lacking words to appreciate the support lent to me by K.P.R. Nair, Managing Director of Konark Publishers. As a reputed publisher of numerous books by well established writers over the last few decades, Mr Nair has earned wide acclaim in the field. His commitment to make this book on Guru a success is greatly appreciated.

On this occasion, let me prostrate to the memory of my parents who were devout followers of Guru until their last breath. Last but not least, let me appreciate my family for all the support that was given to me over the years to make this project a reality.

Introduction

A Personal Reflection

Personally, I am not completely convinced of my worthiness to undertake a noble venture such as this. After graduating from High School, I had an intense desire to join Guru's ascetic mission but I was unable to pursue my wish due to force of circumstances. Since then, fate has taken me through unfamiliar landscapes. Along this journey, the grace of Guru has led me through the troubled waters of life. For the last forty years or so, regardless of the situation, I seldom spent a day without reading, writing or thinking on Guru. And in the last few years, I spent a considerable amount of time reading about Guru as I was writing and rewriting this book.

The life and philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru is like a wide ocean. As a child playing on its shore, I only claim to hold a tiny shell-full of knowledge of such a boundless source. Yet, I believe that Guru has mercifully granted me a certain level of understanding on him

to go ahead with this attempt and I felt his blessings while writing this book. To my great surprise, on many occasions, words, ideas and passages flew to me as if from a mysterious source. Nevertheless, the effort wasn't an easy one as any serious writing is nothing but a painful *sadhana*.

No matter what I may have been going through, thinking on Guru, reading his verses or devouring books on him was to me a blissful escape. Such transformative experiences would undoubtedly prompt anyone to wonder at the amazing grace of the great Guru who lived barely a century ago, leading an illustrious life while being a humble sage and detached ascetic. To me, the experience was profound. It allowed me to study more diligently the life and persona of the great sage who has been my guiding light since I was a young boy.

The major part of this book was written while I was in the United States. I studied, worked and lived in America for most of my adult life. To me, America has always remained a land of many contradictions as well as amazing resilience.

I was a resident of Philadelphia for many years. It was in this old city that America was born two hundred and forty years ago. I was often fascinated by the noble vision espoused by the founding fathers of this new nation who devised the magnificent document, the *Declaration of Independence*, in 1776. This famous proclamation was the central theme of the assembly in Philadelphia during the American Revolution. I was fascinated by the immortal statement enshrined in the preamble of the *Declaration of Independence*. It reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Sree Narayana Guru's vision of the Ideal Abode where all humans throng together in true brotherhood was proclaimed in 1888. I was enchanted by a certain level of resemblance Guru's vision had with the American *Declaration of Independence*. Modern America, even though far from perfect, was shaped by humanists and innovative thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine and Patrick Henry. The above statement was a product of their collective ideals.

America is also the land of the great humanist Henry David Thoreau. It was his acclaimed essay of 1849 "Civil Disobedience" that inspired Mohandas Gandhi while in South Africa. Gandhi practically applied Thoreau's principles first in South Africa and then in India during the freedom struggle. Later, Martin Luther King Jr. passionately emulated Gandhi in the 1960s during his protests against the grave injustices of the American society.

Like the caste system of India which continues to divide and degrade people, the American society is also to an extent still divided on the lines of race. The caste system flourished for centuries in India with all its dehumanizing traits regardless of a noble spiritual heritage and an all-encompassing philosophy that envisioned the oneness of all beings. Paradoxically, modern America, which produced one of the greatest documents on democracy and individual freedom, is also stained by the fissures of race and a history of slavery.

Yet I am convinced that both nations, however imperfect, possess inherent strengths and unique characteristics. As a beacon of hope for tomorrow's global nation, America as well as India exemplify the values of unity in diversity. Whenever I walk through the streets of Philadelphia, I see the friendly faces of a multitude of people of many races and ethnicities who share links to different nations, continents and cultures. Beyond the outward features of multiculturalism, I feel in this soil the symbolism of an ideal abode of humanity envisioned by Sree Narayana Guru. I hope that a nation like this would one day recognize the true greatness of Sree Narayana Guru and his vision of the one-world.

Today, we are exasperated by the chain of adverse challenges to our wellbeing as human beings. As our world is marred by madness from many quarters that threaten not only peace on earth but our very existence as a race, the internalization of values that promotes in all of us a transformative feeling of mutual understanding and respect is the need of the hour.

The daily dose of horrifying news on acts of terrorism and loss of innocent lives, the never-ending unholy wars between religious and political factions, the rise of fundamentalism around the globe, the collective animosities and the widening divide between different castes, races and classes have taken away our peace of mind. Besides we

face many threats to our delicate habitat in the form of environmental pollution and other atrocities toward nature.

The ancient *rishis* of the *Upanishads* as well as the prophets, sages and mystics of every religion and culture across the globe have guided mankind since antiquity to tread the path of virtue whenever forces of darkness try to lure us. Sree Narayana Guru's life, messages and philosophical works exemplify this great tradition of moral and ethical purification.

I hope my humble attempt here to communicate with the reader on the versatile personality of this modern sage will be received as a positive endeavour in this challenging time. I hope that an understanding of the unique life and humanitarian philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru will not only help to overcome the self-deluding identities imposed by caste, race or ethnicities but also enable us to bridge the wide divide between religions, nations and people.

Who was Sree Narayana Guru?

From time immemorial India has been known as a land of spiritual quest and philosophical introspection. Many were the rishis, saints, sages and holy personalities who walked on its soil, shared their contemplative knowledge and left a magnificent heritage for future generations. The foundation of the Indian civilization was laid by those ancient spiritual masters who led a life of renunciation and lived as embodiments of selflessness. We are indebted forever to those humble rishis for their unparalleled vision, wisdom and inspiring revelations.

During its long period of history, Indian civilization has been through numerous phases of challenges and transformations. Its values, philosophies and mythologies were accepted by people beyond its borders while India as a civilization absorbed the cultural and religious values, ethos, art and ideas of others. While most ancient cultures and legacies of the ancient world either simply receded, unable to withstand the test of time, or were wiped out by force from the face of earth, the vitality of Indian civilization has endured even through the darkest moments of history.

Its amazing strength in the face of internal and external challenges has astonished the native as well as foreign observers and thinkers. The agility of the Indian character to absorb and assimilate cultures, customs, religions, languages and lifestyles entirely alien from its own, while preserving the fundamental characteristics as a distinct civilization, remains its unique strength. It is this forte which enabled the Indian civilization to face even the most adverse challenges with a certain level of self-assurance.

This by no means was an easy journey. Despite the heritage of an enlightened philosophy and culture, Indian civilization went through long periods of gloom and despair. The values and vision espoused by the ancient sages had been maligned, abused and manipulated by vested interests. The wisdom nurtured by those wise men was ignored or forgotten at different intervals. As a result, the civilization was haunted by centuries of intellectual stagnation, cultural blackout, and societal dysfunction. Those adverse challenges have caused immense damage to the innate purity, fragrance and greatness of the culture.

Fortunately, as a continuation of the long chain of the *rishi* tradition, holy personalities and spiritual visionaries arrived from time to time to revive and rescue the civilization and its culture whenever it was in danger of extinction. In fact, it was through their timely interferences that its vitality was restored in critical moments of history.

Sree Narayana Guru's historical arrival on the scene was at such a challenging time. Politically, India was struggling under the suppressive yoke of foreign rule. Moreover, socially, culturally, and intellectually, the society was experiencing one of the darkest periods in its history. The caste system, the traditional socio-religious stratification among the Indian society, was at its worst. Sadly, in the midst of all this, as individuals and as a society, the values of freedom and dignity were almost lost or forgotten.

When Sree Narayana Guru entered the social scene of southern India in 1888, it effectively opened a floodgate of fresh ideas and new possibilities. Inspiring the emergence of a progressive environment in Kerala, he forced the eradication of many unjust, inhumane and irrational practices that were prevalent for a long time. His teachings

on improving the value of material and spiritual life, strict declarations against superstitious notions on castes, passionate sermons on religious harmony, calls for modern education and unprecedented efforts on social and religious reformation were among the contributing factors that prompted the progressive leap of the southern region of India from a long and crippling state of stagnation.

As a true philosopher and spiritualist with an intense social consciousness, he accurately diagnosed the collective ignorance in the minds of the people, an ignorance that stemmed from a lack of genuine awareness about our true nature as living beings, as the fundamental cause of society's illness.

According to his philosophy, the divisions among people and its ensuing negative ramifications can be solved only through the acquisition of the right knowledge, a knowledge based on a genuine understanding of the commonalities that connect all human beings. So, he devoted himself to awaken the society in multifaceted ways towards such an understanding of oneness.

As a *sanyasin* of a different order, his words and deeds were always aimed at transforming the world into an enlightened state of unity, equality and fraternity. He envisioned an ideal home "devoid of dividing walls" where all people can throng together as one family permeating the barriers of caste, race, religion, ethnicity and nationality. He believed that the immense possibilities of each individual self can only be nurtured and enhanced in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and freedom.

As an enlightened soul, with compassion as his core, he worked among the poor and the wretched, empowering the weak and ignorant. The mere presence of his spiritual aura provided great solace for an entire generation of men and women who until then had been convinced of their unworthiness.

Even though he led the life of a humble ascetic, he was always fearless in his actions. His sense of justice, strength of convictions, intellectual acumen and spiritual prowess enabled his acceptance among the masses as their foremost leader. His compassionate calls for self-renewal have captivated the mind, heart, and intellect of men and women across a wide spectrum of orientation.

Like a magician wielding his wand, this humble prophet was able to bring thousands of individuals from all walks of life under his sway. His words were accepted as divine utterances as he persuaded others to change their deformed ways of life and modes of thinking in drastic ways.

As we try to discern the life of Sree Narayana Guru, it would become evident that he exemplified the true wisdom of the *Upanishadic* tradition of ancient India. Like the sage-poets of the *Upanishads*, he composed verse after verse which proclaimed his philosophy and vision of the well-being of all entities. As a great sage and as a seeker of eternal Truth, he tried to bridge the ancient wisdom of the past with the social realities of the present.

Moreover, his philosophical contributions in the form of epic creations such as *Atmopadesa-satakam*, *Darsana-mala*, *Advaita-deepika*, *Swanubhawa-Geethi* and *Brahmavidya-panchakam* epitomize the exemplary resilience of the long-ignored truths and values revealed by the ancient rishis of the *Upanishads*. He redefined the parameters of Godhood and reinterpreted the ancient philosophical doctrines and theology in human context.

Unlike traditional saints, seers and ascetics, Sree Narayana Guru was regarded as one of the most socially conscious Guru figures India has seen in its long history. Even though he lived amidst people as one of the most diligent activist-sanyasins in India's history, as a spiritual master he always remained in the realm of a true sage. Millions of devotees in Kerala and around the world consider Sree Narayana Guru as an avatar of *Iswar* or God incarnate. Today, many scholarly men and women around the world value him as a universal Guru for a global age.

Life at a Glance

Sree Narayana Guru was born on August 28, 1855 (C.E.) in a well reputed family in the southern region of India.

His father Madan Asan was a teacher by profession who taught the locals basic language skills and grammar and thus earned his title *Asan* or tutor. He was also a Sanskrit scholar as well as a skilled farmer

and commanded a high level of recognition in the local community. His mother Kuttiamma was a pious woman who was very particular about observing the traditional religious rituals. She was well-versed in popular religious texts *Bagavatham* and *Ramayana* and recited those narrative poems regularly. *Bagavatham* is a collection of stories on the pastimes of Lord Krishna. *Ramayana* describes the illustrious life of Lord Rama and his many ordeals.

Both Krishna and Rama are considered *avatars* or incarnations of Lord Vishnu, the supreme deity in charge of the preservation of all beings according to the Hindu pantheon. As a young boy, he developed a special liking towards those devotional readings. He was always at his mother's side whenever she melodiously read the holy books.

He was different from other children from an early age. He followed a life of staunch discipline. As a devoted student, even before reaching the prime of youth, he learned the essential texts on traditional sciences or *shastras* and became an accomplished scholar on prominent classical scriptures.

He read extensively in Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit and composed a series of hymns and mystic poems in the early years of his adult life. Because of his exceptional command in Sanskrit, the classical language of ancient India, even scholarly men, including his uncles and teachers, would often consult with him for clarifications whenever they weren't sure of the intended meaning of certain verses.

As a young man, Narayanan seldom showed any inclination to lead the mundane life of a householder. His yearning for pursuing a spiritual path only grew stronger whenever he was tempted with the comforts of material life. An inextinguishable resolve for the attainment of eternal bliss and supreme wisdom had engulfed his soul. After leaving his family and relatives in his youth, he wandered at length for years to realize his life's calling.

During this long and arduous journey, he acquired the hidden secrets of *Yoga*, the spiritual science of India. While pursuing his spiritual destination, he spent considerable time in solitude, conducted prolonged meditations and underwent severe penance for several years in remote caves and uninhabited hills of the southern region of India.

Renouncing material pleasures, he led the life of an ascetic. While he was in his thirties, he became an attained Yogi, a master of the mind and a conqueror of the mystic forces of Nature. After leading long years of contemplative life in seclusion, he attained enlightenment.

According to the Indian spiritual tradition, enlightened souls seldom involve in the affairs of the society because such experiences may disturb their state of ecstasy. The issues of everyday life have no impact on these sacred personalities. They see no valid reason for engagement in the material affairs of the common people.

As masters of renunciation, *yogis* and sages enjoy staying in secluded mountain caves or in humble huts deep within wild forests. They rely on the forces of Nature to sustain their lives. Their minds become sources of eternal peace and their purified souls fill with the nectar of joy while their physical body emanates rays of grace.

Fortunately, Sree Narayana Guru preferred to break away from the traditional path of his predecessors. He undertook a supreme sacrifice to benefit the rest of society. Rather than remaining in the state of a detached soul, he decided to reach out to the world around him. Following the path of great spiritual masters and social activists of the past like Buddha, Sree Narayana Guru also devoted himself to rescuing his fellow human beings.

The Landscape

Kerala: God's Own Country

Kerala, the southernmost state of India, now popularly known as "God's Own Country", is a beautiful strip of land squeezed between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. This tropical paradise is covered with coconut trees, lush paddy fields and a wide variety of tropical plants and trees. Rivers, lakes and a multitude of streams make the land exceptionally fertile.

Kerala has also been traditionally blessed with two seasons of monsoon rains perfectly matching with its traditional farming practices. It has been saved from severe droughts as well as deadly floods by nature's design. In its thick forests wild animals including elephants, tigers and monkeys roam freely. Vast hills, wide meadows and valleys blanketed in green add to its scenic beauty. The unique diversity of the land also signifies the traditional character and culture of the people as well.

Kerala's own pepper, cardamom and other spices have attracted the outside world for centuries. Even though foreign powers came to many places of northern India as attackers and conquerors, the experience was relatively different in Kerala. Many of the foreign powers of the old world including the Greeks, Romans, Chinese and Arabians had trade relationships with Kerala since 1500 B.C. The modern powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French and the British also reached the shores of Kerala as traders.

Historically, the people of Kerala have been friendly, warm, and open minded, and were known for their hospitality. When Jews, Christians and Muslims arrived on the shores of Kerala, they were all welcomed wholeheartedly by the local rulers and the people. After the burning and destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in the 1st century C.E. by Romans, while Europeans were hunting down the Jews and murdering them en masse for mere amusement, Kerala provided a safe haven to the Jews who came as refugees.

Religious animosity was anathema to the traditional character traits of the people of Kerala. They have been the foremost practitioners of tolerance at least since the beginning of the first millennium. In Kerala, adherents of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, the three major religions of the world, coexist in relative peace and harmony.

During the first five centuries of the new millennium from 1 C.E. to 500 C.E. known as the Sangam Age, Kerala experienced an enlightened era. Under the Chera rulers, it was progressing in all walks of life including culture, religion, literature, agriculture and trade. The harbours at coastal Kerala from north to south flourished during this time. Ships from Arabia and Rome reached its shore for trade. The civilized society of early Kerala welcomed other cultures and people from distant lands.

According to published sources, Jainism and then Buddhism arrived in Kerala as early as the 3rd century B.C.E. Until the 8th century C.E., Buddhism was very popular in Kerala. This glorious period in the fields of art, culture, religion, philosophy, language, literature, politics and governance lasted for more than one thousand years. During this golden era, the people of Kerala experienced an exceptional period of peace, prosperity and equality. Beyond any

doubt, Buddhism, its philosophy, traditions, and culture have left an indelible mark on Kerala society.

Kerala before Sree Narayana Guru

Kerala was a relatively peaceful and progressive society for many centuries before the *Chaturvama*-based caste system took control of the society.

According to the early history of Kerala, the region was the stronghold of Dravidian religion and culture. Even though different caste groups existed during that time, the society was not rigid but flexible. Equality among the groups was accepted as the norm and every job had its dignity. As Jainism and Buddhism arrived in Kerala, the majority of the people accepted their values and teachings wholeheartedly. Hyun Tsang, the famous Chinese traveller who visited India in 620 C.E., noted that there was a huge population of Buddhists in Kerala during his visit. Even though Vedic religion also existed in Kerala during that time, the society was not dominated by Brahmins who lived in exclusive enclaves.

The *chaturvama* based caste system under the growing influence of Brahmins began to gain momentum in Kerala during the 8th century with the decline of Jainism and Buddhism. As Islamic invasions became frequent. Brahmins from northern India moved to the south including Kerala in large numbers. Brahmins formed numerous settlements all over Kerala from north to south with a concentration in central Kerala. Soon their well-organized and highly skilled communities became powerful and influential in society. Gradually, the native culture as well as the Buddhist religion was subdued by the aggressive influence of the Brahmin priestly class.

As Buddhism declined in Kerala, *caste-Brahminism* became a dominating force in society. The system of *chaturvama* was introduced. Soon the society underwent severe social stratifications based on vama and caste. As Brahmin domination in Kerala became a reality, the people who opposed them were degraded in social status and were reduced into a lot of despised beings. The ones who decided to toe the line scripted by the Brahmin establishment were elevated in social status and were accepted within the *Chaturvama*

system. According to sociologists and historians, untouchability was enforced for the first time in Kerala during the early stages of the post-Buddhist era.

Historians point out that those who opposed Brahmin supremacy gradually lost their freedom, dignity, social status as well as the privileges they had enjoyed for centuries. In addition, those who decided to remain as Buddhists also lost control of many of their religious centers. It is probable that when powerful groups switched their religious orientation, they also took with them their religious centers and converted them as places of their newly adopted faith.

Some historians are of the view that force was used in the attempt to take over earlier Buddhist centers. A few were abandoned to ruin. The Buddha statues found in many places in mid-Travancore such as Mavelikkara, Karunagappally and Ambalappuzha, along with the many rituals still existing in those areas, understandably indicate the influence Buddhism once wielded in those regions. In order to seize the land from the native farming communities, new rules were made for the forceful transfer of ownership of land to the local deity of the temple.

As Brahmins took total control of the society, temples became the new power centers. Brahmin priests acted as the representative of the God and the ruling class became subservient to the priestly class. As Brahmins became the custodians of temple properties including vast areas of fertile land previously cultivated by the hardworking natives, they became immensely rich, making them both financially and politically powerful.

For protecting their property and other interests, the financially strong Brahmins encouraged the formation of a community of warriors to support them. Eventually control within such a community was consolidated by a powerful chieftain. He was awarded many privileges including vast areas of farming land. This process led to the formation of a network of aristocratic power centers in Kerala since the 9th century. Those aristocratic families leased out the land received from the Brahmin land owners to individual tenants for cultivation. This resulted in the emergence of a new feudal aristocracy in Kerala. Gradually, various classes and caste-groups with varying rights and privileges were formed around the elite Brahmins. The unholy

alliance between the ruling class and the Brahmin establishment was instrumental in drastically changing the social backdrop of Kerala from 10th century.

By the time of Sree Narayana Guru's birth during the middle of the 19th century, the *Chaturvarnya*-based caste system had evolved into a monstrous demon. The draconian codes of the caste system effectively strangled the life of the marginalized masses, availing them no escape. The Brahmin priestly class wielded complete control of the society. Many of the original Vedic texts were reinterpreted to justify the divinity of the caste system.

In this regard, I must point out that it was the scholars, philosophers and the spiritually inclined among the Brahmins who were primarily responsible for keeping alive the flame of Vedic wisdom through the millenniums. They played a critical role in perpetuating the Vedic knowledge by following a life of strict discipline and austerity. Their contributions deserve due acknowledgement and appreciation.

However, as stated earlier, the vested interests among the Brahmin priest class were responsible for distorting, contaminating, and maligning the original philosophical wisdom and spirituality. Their unholy interventions in the course of history caused immense damage to the wisdom espoused by the ancient *rishis*.

Kerala's Caste System

For almost a thousand years since the 10th century C.E., a dark age set upon the social life in Kerala. The caste system, which is still to this day a stain on the national fabric of India, had effectively infiltrated all aspects of life in Kerala. Even though the caste system was practiced all over India for many centuries, the malicious practice that existed in Kerala was by far thought to be the worst.

The society was divided into *savamas* and *avamas*. *Savamas* included the privileged castes from Brahmins to Nairs while all lower castes were collectively categorized as *avranas*. There was no shortage of demeaning treatments or discriminatory practices in Kerala during the 19th century towards the lower castes who were considered as untouchables by the upper castes. Those derogatory practices were strictly enforced by religious edicts. The depth and intensity of the

trials they endured, facing endless harassment and discrimination, rarely had any parallel in human history. It was ironic that despite its rich heritage and tradition of tolerance, Kerala had stooped to such a pitiful level.

The society was stratified into various exclusive compartments known as castes and any interaction among the groups was strictly regulated through caste-edicts. Membership to a specific caste was determined by birth. The possibility of any escape was thus closed forever. Everybody was bound to obey the superstitious laws without a murmur. Offenders faced severe punishments. Understandably, nobody dared to violate such practices.

People from the bottom layers suffered the most as they were segregated and considered "untouchables" or pollutants. Moreover, the privileged groups looked down on those despised beings with contempt and treated them far worse than people infected by contagious diseases. Living lives without any basic human rights, generations simply perished after a tiring life as slave-labours in the vast farmlands of upper-caste landlords.

Education was not only denied to lower castes but deemed a punishable offense. Any attempt to acquire even basic literacy was severely penalized. As the doors of education were closed for them for generations, the illiterate and ignorant masses remained an easy target for manipulation and abuse by the privileged. Thus, the lack of education triggered a cascading effect among the masses by perpetuating their collective ignorance, lethargy and vulnerability.

Access to all basic necessities including food, clothing and shelter was carefully restricted as every aspect of the life of a lower caste person was controlled by the upper castes. They even lacked access to clean water and had to rely on sources like streams or ponds for taking water for cooking and drinking. Only *savamas* were allowed to draw water from wells.

The "untouchable" communities lacked the right to even associate with others, wear the clothing or ornaments of their choice, the right to construct a dwelling within their means or the right to work according to their abilities and taste. Even worse, they were compelled to give their offspring demeaning names as a mark of automatic submission. Conventional names were the prerogative of

the higher castes. Freedom of movement was strictly regulated, and were often brutally punished if they were found using the trails or pathways used by upper castes. They were denied the right to practice faith like the upper castes and were barred from entering temples. Moreover, they were not allowed to use streets or alleys near temples.

The use of language was strictly regulated to identify the distinct castes within the *savamas* and among the *avamas*. A person of each caste had to use a specific term prescribed to that particular caste to describe a single object or equivalent function or action. The usage to describe an object like 'dwelling' or a function like 'taking food' had more than a half-dozen synonyms to fit the exclusive vocabulary for that particular caste.

The untouchables were not allowed to wear any cloth above the waist or below the knee. The most demeaning was the prohibition on untouchable women of ages between sixteen and thirty-five from covering their bosoms. Covering of the upper body from above the waist by a lower caste woman was considered an act of disrespect to the upper castes. So, whenever they ventured out, the lower caste women had to walk bare bosom. Even the use of footwear by untouchables was considered a mark of arrogance.

On the socio-economical aspect, the legal and taxing systems were skewed in favour of the upper castes. For even minor offenses, members of the lower castes were given severe punishment. But the upper caste escaped altogether or met with only slight penalties even if found guilty of serious crimes. Upper castes were exempted from land tax, labour tax and the like. But numerous absurd taxes were levied on the working class. The untouchable communities of Kerala were forced to pay more than one hundred heinous taxes to the exchequer in the erstwhile kingdom of Travancore. These taxes were an indirect tactic by the ruling royalty to subjugate the lower caste people and to keep them under financial strain.

One such notorious tax was '*mulakaram*' or 'breast tax' which was assessed based on the size of a lower caste woman's breast. The royal government employed special tax officials to assess the size of a woman's breasts. So, these poor women had to go through the demeaning experience of showing their bare breast to the officials for

making a 'reasonable assessment'. Unbelievably, the '*mulakaram*' had to be paid to the royal government of Travancore by the untouchable women for the right to cover the breast.

Around two centuries ago, Nangeli, a proud and courageous young lady of Ezhava caste, chopped off both her breasts in protest against the insulting experience. She handed over the blood covered breasts on a plantain leaf to the government official who arrived at her door demanding the controversial tax. While the tax collector fled off upon seeing the dreadful present, the bold lady bled to death because of her deep wounds.

Unable to bear the loss, Chirukandan, her husband, committed suicide by jumping into his wife's funeral pyre. The incident took place in 1803 near Cherthala in Alappuzha district. Fearing public outburst, the very next day the obnoxious breast tax was withdrawn by Sree Moolam Thirunal Maharaja, the king of Travancore. Since then the site of Nangeli's martyrdom has been called *mulachipparambu* as a sad reminder of the horrific event.

Between 1818 and 1858, Travancore experienced a series of sporadic violent revolts in the kingdom for the right of lower caste women to cover their body decently. The struggle was termed 'Channar Mutiny'. Any move against the existing caste codes and customs was met with violent force by the upper castes. In order to quell the unrest and to restore peace, on July 6, 1859, the king of Travancore issued a proclamation granting the right to lower castes to cover the upper body. Even after many decrees like these, the institutionalized discriminatory attitudes ingrained in the minds of upper castes remained in force for many more decades.

Even though the British wielded ultimate political authority, they preferred a hands-off approach on religious issues to avoid antagonizing the native rulers for political reasons. In effect, the political establishment colluded with the upper castes in the guise of preserving local customs, and the exploited masses continued to suffer as there remained no scope for relief.

By the time of Sree Narayana Guru's birth, this was the plight of people who were stigmatized as "untouchables." Those destitute men and women simply pushed on with their slave-like lives one day at a time, struggling against all odds.

Kerala, a Lunatic Asylum

Almost all cultures and nations of the world, both ancient and modern, experienced a period of darkness sometime in their history. Asia, Arabia, Africa, Europe, and the American continents have ample stories to tell in this regard. Slavery, colonialism, Inquisition, Holocaust, religious bigotry, racism and casteism as well as many unjust and discriminatory practices caused immense damage to the dignity and welfare of people worldwide. It was not unusual that the disgruntled victims, even when weak and fragile, possessed a propensity to unite and fight for remedying these curses.

The Kerala phenomenon was unique in the sense that the victims generally failed to distinguish the injustice inherent in the experiences they were subjected to. As they were made to believe that their sufferings were mandated by divine Providence and they were born into such a life because of the deeds in their past births, they took the brutal ill-treatment and abuses meted out to them quietly. In the process, they lost their sense of dignity and also the capacity even to dream about an improved life.

They were conditioned to accept that by serving the higher castes earnestly and observing the customs demanded by the caste system, they were getting an opportunity to uplift their plight in the next birth. So, the majority of lower caste Hindus, the victims of extreme social inequalities, abject poverty and illiteracy, seldom recognized the necessity to improve their pathetic plight and led a life more deplorable than stray dogs.

Oddly enough, according to the established customs in those days, if an untouchable converted into other faiths such as Christianity or Islam, that person was no more bound by the caste rules. In other words, as soon as a person got converted to Christianity or Islam, that individual escaped the draconian caste-rules meant for the "lower castes". The senseless contradiction was that the burden of caste rules applied only to those who remained loyal Hindus despite the abuse of upper castes.

Naturally, many *untouchables* found religious conversion as an easy escape from the caste system. Many from all over Kerala embraced

Christianity or Islam. The converts usually became beneficiaries of many material bounties in addition to relief from the dehumanizing treatment. Those who left Hinduism and particularly chose Christianity gained better education and employment prospects.

The opportunity offered by Christian missionaries for escaping the burden of caste through religious conversion appeared as a novel gift to many lower castes. As a result, many Ezhavas in huge numbers from various parts of Kerala, a vast majority of the Naadaar community of southern Kerala, fishermen communities of coastal areas and Dalit communities such as Pulaya and Paraya from all over Kerala converted, especially into Christianity.

When Swami Vivekananda, the legendary *sanyasin* and popular emissary of modern Hinduism, visited Travancore during December 1892, he was appalled by its weird practices. Vivekananda was further puzzled by the attitude of the Hindu kingdom and by the behaviour of the upper caste Hindus. Deeply pained, Swami Vivekananda characterized the state of Travancore as a "lunatic asylum".

Without doubt, Kerala was worse than a "lunatic asylum" by the time Sree Narayana Guru set foot on the scene.

The Grooming of an Ascetic (1855-76)

If I Am Happy, God Will be Happy

Around one hundred and sixty years ago in Chempazhanty, a rural village in southern India, there lived a noble Ezhava family. Madan Asan, its head, was a respected scholar. Kuttiamma, his wife, was a virtuous woman. The couple had four children, a boy and three girls. The son, the oldest, was very close to his mother and she helped him imbibe spiritual and moral values from early childhood.

It has been a tradition of Indian mothers to awake at the break of dawn, bathe and perform puja or religious rituals before beginning the day's chores. Being a devout person, Kuttiamma followed the traditions as earnestly as possible. Every morning she made offerings to the deities, prayed before them and recited certain verses from the

Bhagavatham or *Ramayana*, the two most popular Hindu holy texts. Only then would she enter the kitchen to prepare meals.

Kuttiamma's daily routine went smoothly. One day a strange thing occurred. As usual, she woke up early. It was the wee hours of the morning and except for the melodious chirping of birds the atmosphere was serene and pious. Her son also awoke and stayed by her side as she was preparing for the day. He watched his mother place offerings such as sweets, fruits and flowers on a plate before the deity. The Nilavilakku, the traditional oil lamp, was lit. She sat down comfortably on a mat and prayed silently for a few moments with folded hands and closed eyes. At this moment, the little boy hurriedly grabbed the sweets and fruits placed as offerings to the deity.

When his mother looked up, the charming child was seen calmly consuming the sweets. She was stunned and upset at the odd behaviour of her most obedient child and wanted to punish him.

"What have you done O' naughty one?" As she tried to grab the boy, he slipped away.

To Kuttiamma, her son had committed an "unforgivable" offence and she found it hard to overlook what had taken place. The mother never suspected that her son would sneak in and eat the fruits and sweets offered to the deity. If he had waited a little, he could have had them all anyway. To the mother, the child's misdeed had disrupted the natural order of that day.

In response to his frustrated mother, the son simply said: "God will be happy if I am happy." Kuttiamma was taken aback by her son's quick response. Her anger eventually melted away at his charm and wit. However, it was not until later that the meaning of his words was grasped.

The boy's name was Narayanan. Everybody adoringly called him Naanu. Naanu's childhood was full of such events. He was a charming child, and children as well as elders loved to be around him. Sometimes, however, he would seem too serious. His parents and other seniors in the family often found it hard to answer some of his basic questions.

For example, he would ask:

"Why can't I be friend with Chathan?"

"Is he not a human being?"

"Who created the caste system?"

He was referring to his parent's prohibitions against befriending Chathan, a boy of his age but belonging to an ostracized community of "untouchables". As a child, Naanu was often pained and frustrated by similar commandments of the elders that limited his free will to choose friends. He would ask himself: "Are we all not God's children? Then why can't we play together?"

Naanu knew Chathan since childhood. Chathan's parents were often engaged in menial work at Naanu's home. Those poor folks also brought their son along when they arrived for work. Unfortunately, they lived during the middle of the 19th century and it was a dark period in the history of Kerala. The ruthless caste system permeated almost every aspect of society and dictated even the minute terms of social life.

Even as a child, Naanu was courageous enough to challenge the senseless customs held so sacred for centuries. Regardless of the consequences, he tried his best to follow his common sense and conscience. Often his parents and close relatives had to face humiliating setbacks as a result of young Naanu's revolts.

His innocent but poignant questions effectively silenced even the scholarly seniors in his family. With the passage of time, the young boy grew up to become the source of hope and solace to millions of marginalized people.

An Ideal Family of Scholars and Physicians

Vayalvaram was the name of Naanu's family home. Since Vayalvaram literally means "in the close vicinity of paddy fields," the name suggests that Naanu's family was engaged in farming and their home was situated near paddy fields. Traditionally, each family dwelling carries a name in Kerala. That identity carries certain significance in the society for the members of that family. For many generations, Vayalvaram was a well-established family in Chempazhanty. They owned vast areas of farmland and were wealthy and prosperous.

Both Raman Vaidyer and Krishnan Vaidyer, Kuttiamma's brothers, were reputed Ayurvedic physicians and Sanskrit scholars. Kochanasan, Kuttiamma's uncle, was a renowned astrologer, a traditional interpreter of positions and movements of celestial bodies in relation to its influence on human life. Moreover, Kochanasan was revered for his strict adherence to lifelong celibacy and was a spiritual guide to the community.

Kochanasan was also an expert scribe on palm leaves and was sought far and wide for his services. Traditionally, palm leaves have been extensively used in India at least since 5th century B.C.E. for writing religious literature. Even though indigenous paper making technology in India was believed to be first developed during the 15th century, palm leaves were used as the primary writing material in southern India for the many centuries.

Since 18th century, government records and land registration documents were also recorded on palm leaflets. For use as a writing surface, palm leaf has to go through several stages of treatment to ensure its durability and longevity. In Malayalam, a single processed palm leaflet is known as *thaliola*. Its average length is around three feet with a width of around two inches.

The writer specialized in the art of writing on palm leaves is known as *ezhuthu asan*. The sharp metal tool used for engraving letters is called *narayam*. Usually, each palm leaflet had to be copied down to new ones after a limited time. This process required the expertise of people like Kochanasan. After the introduction of paper printing in the early 19th century, palm leaf writing and copying became obsolete.

Chempazhanty, the village blessed as the birthplace of Sree Narayana Guru, is located approximately seven miles north of Thiruvananthapuram. Thiruvananthapuram, also known as Trivandrum, is the capital of Kerala, India's southernmost state.

Kerala, during the time of Guru, was divided into three major regions - Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Malabar was then under the direct rule of the British while Travancore and Cochin held the status of princely states. Both Travancore and Cochin were ruled by Hindu kings who enjoyed nominal sovereignty while the British retained political control over them.

Chempazhanty was a beautiful and serene place as it had plenty of paddy fields as well as thick forests. Even kings came to enjoy its pastures and to hunt in its forests. Even though Chempazhanty was a remote rural area in those days, it had its place in the history of Travancore as it was the home of an erstwhile rebellious chief, popularly known as Chempazhanty Pillai. He was one among the eight such feudal chiefs, popularly known as *Ettuveetil Pillamar* who opposed the hegemony of King Marthanda Varma. It was Marthanda Varma who established the powerful Hindu kingdom of Travancore in the 18th century, conquering and uniting many weaker and smaller kingdoms in the region.

Vayalvaram, the family home of Naanu, was located near Manakal Devi temple in Chempazhanty. Originally, Manakal temple was managed together by both Nairs and Ezhavas, the two most prominent communities in Kerala. According to Hindu caste hierarchy, Nairs enjoyed higher status than Ezhavas. Nairs and those above them were categorized as caste-Hindus or *savamas*. Ezhavas and those who below them were termed *avamas*.

In those days of severe caste differentiation, it was peculiar that the management of the Manakal temple was shared by these two otherwise estranged communities. Even though matters were smooth for a while as far the affairs of the temple were concerned, gradually disagreements and distrust arose between the two communities. Eventually, the functioning of the Manakal temple became the sole responsibility of the Vayalvaram family. The uniqueness of Naanu's family was evident in the significant influence and role it enjoyed in the functioning of the Manakal temple.

There was a reason for this unique privilege and influence enjoyed by the Vayalvaram family. During the struggle between king Marthanda Varma and the feudal Nair chiefs for political power in Travancore, the then head of the Vayalvaram family, Shanku Asan, along with a prominent Nair family in the area risked his life in order to save the king from imminent danger. After defeating the rebels, as a reward for their crucial service, the king offered the Manakal temple jointly to both the families.

Even after the reign of King Marthanda Varma, successive kings kept a cordial relationship with the Vayalvaram family. As Naanu's

maternal grandfather was an expert forest trekker, the royal family often sought his guidance during their hunting expeditions in the forests of Chempazhanty.

An Auspicious Birth

Citing witnesses, earlier biographers reported that Naanu didn't cry at the time of birth. Naturally, his parents and other relatives were shocked as they witnessed the uncommon scenario. Their worry was amplified because the baby also didn't cry even when the umbilical cord was cut. As they were frantically examining the baby for signs of life, the infant was found to be breathing properly, the vital sign of life.

If this wasn't enough, the baby never cried even once during his infancy. His mother and relatives couldn't recall such an instance. As an infant, even for his mother's milk, he would patiently wait. The baby was always calm and composed. The unusual behaviour in controlling the self even from birth caught the attention of every body and they took it as a sign of divinity in the child.

As per the local (Malayalam) calendar, Naanu was born early in the morning, characterized as *Brahma-muhurtha*, on *Chathayam* star in the month of *Chingam* in 1031 (M.E.). *Chingam* is the first month of the Malayalam calendar. It is in the month of *Chingam* that *Thiruonam*, the most popular traditional festival of Kerala, occurs. People regardless of caste and creed celebrate the event with gaiety. Naanu was born in this festive occasion as *Chathayam* falls on the third day following *Thiruvonam*. Even though the festival has religious connotations, no other festival carries the prominence that *Thiruonam* enjoys in Kerala.

As per tradition, the festival of *Thiruonam* is to commemorate the symbolic visit of the legendary king, Mahabali. It is said that his kingdom was perfect in every sense and there were no instances of crime, corruption, dishonesty or vanity. Equality was the norm and discrimination in any form was completely absent. There were no caste distinctions. During the reign of Mahabali, his fortunate subjects relished life, experiencing boundless peace and abundant prosperity.

According to legend, though the *asura* King Mahabali was the embodiment of almost all virtues, he was also obsessed with the zeal for power and position. Being a skilled warrior, he conquered all other kingdoms and became the sole emperor of the earth. Afterwards, the king went on to capture Heaven. As *devas*, the natural custodians of Heaven, fled from their abode unable to defend themselves, Mahabali comfortably assumed the throne of Heaven. But the ousted *devas*, in their attempt to win back Heaven, hatched a clever ploy to extinguish Mahabali's threats forever.

Devas and *asuras*, the two mythical power centers, had long-standing enmity. There were ample reasons for their hostility. According to the general concept, *devas* are virtuous beings while *asuras* often possess demonic traits. But the *Puranas*, the religious lore of Hindus, present numerous exceptions as well as overlapping character traits to this general concept. The story of the *asura* king Mahabali also presents such a conflicting example.

The *devas* approached Lord Vishnu, the supreme God, with the hope of winning back heaven. The Lord attentively listened to their grievances and assured them that he would restore their lost glory. The Lord waited for the most opportune occasion for implementing his plan. As king Mahabali was performing a grand *yaga*, a sacrificial ritual to declare his supremacy, Vishnu realized the time has come to act. Based on *dharmic* edicts, the king was obligated to satisfy the needs of ascetics who approach him during the *yaga* ceremony.

The Lord deceitfully assumed the form of *Vamana*, a young hermit, and visited the palace of Mahabali. Without suspecting any hidden motives, the king received the wandering ascetic with due reverence. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, the king offered his willingness to fulfill any wish of the guest. To the surprise of the king, *Vamana* solicited only three paces of land from the king purportedly for conducting meditation. As the king felt the hermit's wish was too meager, he made a few lucrative counteroffers. But *Vamana* artfully turned them all down as if he was not interested in worldly bounties.

Sukracharya, the king's shrewd preceptor, immediately recognized the imminent danger in entertaining the hermit's wish. He warned the king against granting *Vamana*'s request. But Mahabali

ignored the advice of his most trusted guru and graciously granted Vamana's wish. Instantly, the young hermit was transformed into a huge giant. With the first step, he confiscated the whole earth as well as *patala-loka* or the netherworld. With the second step he took the heaven, and there was nothing left for him to place the third and final step. In order to fulfill the promise, the benevolent king bowed before Vamana and submitted his crowned head for placing the remaining step.

The glorious King Mahabali was thus dethroned and was forced to take refuge in the netherworld. In recognition of the greatness of King Mahabali, Lord Vishnu granted a boon allowing him to return to the kingdom annually. According to the mythical story, Mahabali annually visits his dear subjects on *Thiruonam* day.

Today *Thiruonam* season reflects the hopes and aspirations of the people for equality, justice and fraternity. Also, it is unique among the festivals as it is celebrated and enjoyed by all the people of Kerala irrespective of religion or background. It is a time when all come together in the spirit of unity that the festival represents. The symbolic significance of Guru's birth in such a rare occasion is noteworthy.

A Rare Horoscope!

It has been a traditional ritual in Kerala's Hindu homes to prepare a horoscope immediately after the birth of a newborn. This was done for Naanu too. As noted earlier, his uncle was a renowned expert in astrology. As per his astrological configurations, the timing of Naanu's birth was found to be unique and rare. Other astrologers present at the occasion also agreed that the infant would become a great person admired by people far and wide as his horoscope indicated a very special provision termed *Pancha Maha Yogam*.

A horoscope is a complex mathematical analysis conducted by experts of astrology, based on the positions and characteristics of planets and other celestial bodies such as the sun, moon and certain stars at the time of birth. According to Indian astrology, these heavenly bodies have significant influence throughout the life of human

beings. The intensity and nature of their influence is determined by the positions of the planets and stars at a particular moment.

The law of Karma along with the theory of reincarnation together is the basis of astrology. According to the Karma theory, a person's timing of birth symbolically represents the significance of that individual's life. Astrologers make predictions on the natural character traits of the person as well as forecast major events and its timings in life based on a person's time of birth.

A person's present birth is believed to be the continuation of the past as that individual inherits the results of the quality of his accumulated Karma or actions from previous lives. The theory stipulates that as humans are the highest form of intelligent beings in the cosmic cycle of evolution, they also assume significant responsibilities.

According to the theory of reincarnation, all living beings are entangled by the cycle of birth and rebirth until enlightenment or complete realization of God is reached. So, it is incumbent upon a responsible individual to strive toward leading a righteous life at present. It also highlights the notion that every birth is a purposeful act and it should not be considered a mere accident.

Sadly, the Karma theory was misinterpreted and manipulated to suppress and enslave the ignorant masses. For centuries, the Karma theory was abused as a cunning device for perpetuating the legitimacy of artificial and controversial practices associated with the caste system. The privileged classes were able to subjugate and silence the vast majority who were forced to believe that they were born into a particular caste with the ensuing disadvantages because of their actions in past lives.

Sree Narayana Guru always distanced himself from beliefs and practices that he saw as manipulations of the law of Karma. Guru's approach to life and its problems were based more on rationality. He was careful to never compromise any factors that restricted human potential and destiny. Being appalled by its distortion, Guru rarely made any reference to the Karma theory in any of the vast volumes of his philosophical work. Furthermore, he stressed each individual's obligation to uplift and improve themselves through introspection and self-discipline.

An Amusing Protest Against Caste

In Chempazhanty, near Naanu's house, there was a colony of Pulayas. These hardworking people used to toil from morning to night in the open fields owned by higher castes. Even though those men and women were the bread-winners of the society they were treated inhumanely by people of higher castes. Because of their status in this cursed caste system, they were considered impure. These wretched and destitute ones were not allowed to go near the higher castes as it was believed that their mere presence was polluting.

According to the prevailing but corrupted Hindu belief system in those days, direct contact between lower castes and higher castes was strictly prohibited. So, being an Ezhava by birth, Naanu was advised to keep a distance from the Pulayas at all occasions. As per the caste dictums, Ezhavas were considered superior to Pulayas even though Ezhavas were also branded as untouchables. The practice of untouchability was ruthlessly enforced by the established legal codes.

Young Naanu was puzzled by this practice that made no sense to him. He couldn't understand why his parents, uncles and other seniors in the family behaved in such a manner.

"They all seem to talk like wise people! Then how could they act like this?"

Naanu felt deeply hurt when he was forbidden from playing with boys of his age who happened to be Pulayas.

"What is going to happen if I touch them?"

"Why is there so much fear?"

Even at a young age, Naanu could not compromise with his conscience. He was determined to prove that he was right.

As soon as he was able to find a person of Pulaya caste, Naanu would go and touch them thus defying the orders of the elders. He would then go and embrace all other members of his own family in the vicinity. Ignorantly, they would consider themselves impure and unfit to stay in the house until purified. Thus, they all were forced to take a ritual bath to get purified. This amusing act of confronting the misconceptions of purity and the meaningless rituals that ensued had become a routine pastime for the young Naanu.

His parents wished to punish him for his naughtiness. But how could they punish this charming and radiant boy? The young Naanu would smile whenever they caught him, and their anger would immediately melt away.

An Ideal Student

"What a remarkable boy!" That was the usual reflection of those who came across young Naanu. He was a curious learner and his memory power was superb. His yearning for knowledge was evident since early childhood. In the mornings as well as evenings, he would keenly listen to the recitation of *Bhagavatham* or *Ramayan* by his devout mother. During bedtime, his mother would tell him stories from *puranams*. The curious child was captivated by those charming narrations.

His father and uncle were known scholars. Whenever there were any serious discussions between them on matters of interest, Naanu would be an active listener. Even as a young boy, he was also not averse to asking questions or seeking answers about things that required further understanding or clarifications. Often the elders were amazed by the depth of young Naanu's grasp on complex matters.

Naturally, Naanu learned the basic lessons in Malayalam and Sanskrit from his father Madan Asan and uncle Krishnan Vaidyar. When Naanu was around five years of age, he was initiated for formal education with Chempazhanty Moothapillai, the elder member of an aristocratic Nair family in the village of Chempazhanty. Even though caste system and untouchability was very much prevalent during that time, Moothapillai Asan appeared to be moderate as far as his dealings with Naanu were concerned.

Being a gifted student of extraordinary intelligence, Naanu became an intimate disciple of Moothapillai Asan. The customary curriculum for primary education in those days consisted of *Siddharoopam*, *Sreeramodantam*, *Balaprabodham* as well as the Sanskrit grammar "*Amarakosam*". Naanu was able to grasp those complex lessons of literature and grammar with relative ease.

The First Tears

One day he and his friends were returning home after attending school. On the way, they saw a *sanyasin*, a wandering ascetic. His forehead was marked widely with sandalwood paste. His shoulders, arms and chest were covered in sacred ash. The half-naked elderly man appeared completely detached from the surrounding events. The kids followed him, some with reverence but several others for fun.

As many of those children were amused by his matted hair, long-grey beard and weird look, they swiftly hatched up mischief. Their hope was to disgrace and humiliate the *sanyasin*. So, the boys mocked the pious man for a while hoping to provoke him. But the *sanyasin* remained unmoved and didn't pay any attention to their misdeeds. Annoyed by his cold response, a few among them began pelting him with stones. Some of those hit him. He was wounded and began to bleed. But they continued with their mischief. When they become frustrated by the aloofness of the old man, they left him and went home.

Naanu was shaken by the shocking conduct of his friends. But using physical force to stop the abuse was not one of his choices. He also knew that those kids wouldn't pay any heed to his words either. Feeling a sense of helplessness, he cried miserably as if he was the one harmed by their conduct. Even though all his friends left, Naanu couldn't leave the *sanyasin* alone. He silently walked behind the holy man trying miserably to control the tears rolling down his cheeks.

As the holy man looked back, he was surprised to see the young boy.

"Why are you crying my dear son?" the old man asked.

The child looked at the man in saffron robes with tears-filled eyes and told him:

"I couldn't do anything else".

He shared with the old man his agony and misfortune of witnessing such an unbearable incident. The *sanyasin* was surprised to hear the child's compassionate words. He curiously inquired about his family. Adoringly he lifted young Naanu on his shoulders and carried the boy to Vayalvaram.

Naanu's parents were anxiously waiting as he was late from school. The *sanyasin* narrated the whole episode in detail to the elders who gathered at Vayalvaram. Then the *sanyasin* predicted that this boy would one day become a saviour of humanity.

"In this little boy, I foresee a rescuer of the countless destitute people who were deprived of hope for generations."

Shortly after, the *sanyasin* resumed his journey. Naanu watched him with a heavy heart until he faded away from sight.

A Death in the Family

During Naanu's childhood, a death occurred in his family. Naanu's favourite grandmother was ill for a few days. Even though she was given ample care, she passed away. Everyone in the family was saddened by her death. Even grown up men and women wailed like children. Other relatives and neighbours joined the grief. The scene was unbearable for little Naanu.

A few hours passed and then the elders of the family began preparations for the burial. Grandmother was given a ceremonial bath, wrapped in white linen and the body was placed on a long banana leaf that was spread on the courtyard. A lighted *Nila-vilakku* and burning incense were placed near the head. Prayers were recited in a subdued voice. Flowers and rice were offered to the body. Then it was carried away and buried. While the burial ceremony was on, the wailing reached its zenith and gradually thinned. Naanu had been watching the happenings carefully. A few more days passed in gloom, and then everything seemed to become normal.

Soon after this episode, one day the family found that young Naanu was missing. Nobody had seen Naanu for more than a day. Without knowing what had happened, the worried mother began wailing incessantly: "Oh God, my son is missing! Where is he?" Madan Asan, Naanu's father, and other relatives searched in vain for the missing boy. They didn't find any trace of him even though they looked everywhere in the neighboring areas.

When the frustrated relatives lost almost all hope, a Pulaya boy appeared and told them that he had seen Naanu in the middle of a

forest, far away from the Vayalvaram home. Madan Asan and other relatives rushed to the woods where Naanu was. When they found him, Naanu was seated under a tree with closed eyes, immersed in thought.

"Why are you here, Naanu? Are you not afraid? How come you did this to us, my child?"

The visibly sobbing Madan Asan questioned him while affectionately embracing his dear son. They were all exhausted after long hours of search.

While the worried men were curiously awaiting his response, Naanu replied calmly:

"Just a few days ago our old grandmother died and you buried her deep. Everybody was sad and crying miserably. I thought that we were going to be grief-stricken forever. But to my great surprise, you were all happy and normal after a day or two. You were all behaving as if her death didn't matter to you anymore. I was confused by your odd attitude. It was unbearable to be there in such an atmosphere. So, I left."

The six-year-old Naanu found it hard to comprehend the inconsistent and awkward behaviour of the elders. So, he left home, went to the forest and stayed there in seclusion. He was shaken by the mysteries of life, death and the apparent irrelevance of human relationships. His bewildered mind was trying to seek answers to the intricate doubts that bothered him. To the young boy, a death in the family thus became a catalyst for contemplation.

After a pause, the boy asked, "Why are you not bothered about her death anymore? Is death real? Are we all going to die like our old grandma?"

In the seclusion of the forest, they were rendered speechless. Those men were shaken by the piercing questions of the young boy. Not surprisingly, they had no answers. After a few moments of shock, they all left for Vayalvaram.

No doubt those unanswered questions reverberated in their minds and haunted them for days. The child's poignant queries unquestionably reminded them of the mysterious nature of human life. The incident also reflected the range of Naanu's introspective mind.

Saving a Poor Family's Meal

One morning Naanu was on a brief walking expedition. He was a vigilant observer. He usually didn't miss anything on the way. As he was passing by a small hut, he noticed a pot boiling over. He entered the hut and quickly reasoned:

"If the spill continues, the whole pot of rice would soon get spoiled unless taken down from the stove".

With due care, he took the boiling pot out of the fire, extinguished the flames and stayed there guarding the food from stray dogs and other unwanted guests.

After some time, an elderly lady returned to the hut after collecting firewood from a nearby forest. She was taken by surprise at the turn of events. The puzzled woman noticed young Naanu. She quickly surmised what had happened.

She was stunned and scared.

"How would the powerful react over this incident?"

She was sure they would punish her for allowing this caste violation to take place.

The lady spoke in a worried voice:

"I am in deep trouble. You have polluted yourself by entering this lowly hut of mine. Why did you do so, my dear? You should have let us go hungry. Don't you know the rules of the elders?"

Downplaying her fear in a tactful and soothing manner, Naanu smiled and commented: "I know you're hungry and tired. Have some food and take rest." The poor Pulaya woman was taken aback by the boy's calm response. After assuring her that she had done no wrong and nothing would happen to her as a result, the boy walked away.

Later that day, Naanu's uncle Krishnan Vaidyer came to know about this incident. The visibly agitated uncle vigorously questioned his nephew. Even though a scholar himself, Vaidyer also was blinded by status quo and the social norms of the day.

"If I hadn't done it, the whole family would have starved." Naanu answered. The fuming uncle stumbled for words.

Ending Elementary Education

Naanu's formal education with Chempazhanty Moothapillai continued for a few years. He used to recite and discuss Sanskrit verses in the company of his teacher. During one discussion, Moothapillai Asan was amazed by the depth and beauty of an elaboration given by Naanu to a Sanskrit verse. The teacher was convinced the student had nothing more to learn from him.

No doubt Naanu remained an ardent learner even when he was not attending any institution. The thirst for knowledge engulfed him like a burning fire. He devoured several classics, studied philosophical literature, and read texts on Ayurveda and Astrology. When he was confronted with doubts or questions, he relied on his father or uncle to clarify them. Sometimes Naanu tried to find answers himself by contemplating the subject on his own.

His family understood Naanu's craving for knowledge but there were not many avenues left for higher education in the neighbourhood of Chempazhanty for an Ezhava boy. They didn't feel comfortable sending the boy far away for higher studies either. So, Naanu's formal education was put on hold, at least for the time being. He was around sixteen years old then.

In the Lap of Mother Nature

Young Naanu was captivated by Mother Nature. He found solace in solitude. He was never tired or bored of walking long distances alone. During early mornings and in evenings, he strolled along the narrow strips that divide the wide stretches of paddy fields, enjoying its greenery and experiencing the soothing embrace of soft winds. Sometimes he was lost in thoughts.

Whenever mystical questions arose in his mind, he attempted to find answers himself. He would usually go to a remote place with the questions in mind, and contemplate on them until he found an agreeable answer through careful thought and introspection. In attempting to express his feelings or revelations, he would compose verses. He would sing them melodiously while in the wilderness.

Whenever his uncle Krishnan Vaidyer asked him to graze the cattle, he would gladly agree. He would never hurt the poor creatures even if they disregarded his directions. While the cows roamed the green pastures, Naanu would climb a cashew tree and comfortably place himself on its spacious branches. Then looking out at the vast sky, he would recite verses in Sanskrit from memory.

Sometimes he sat under the shade of a tree with closed eyes. On other occasions, he simply sat in the open meadow or at the peak of a hill while fixing his gaze on a faraway horizon. He also enjoyed watching the passing clouds or flocks of birds flying in the distance.

Naanu was fond of farming and he helped the family to produce their own food. During the farming season, he would plough the paddy fields. Even though he was handed over a whip to lead the bullocks that were yoked to the plough, he allowed them to drag him anywhere they wished. He wouldn't use his whip on the bullocks to keep them on the track. To Naanu, whipping the pitiable bullocks was an act of sheer cruelty. In those moments, he would allow his mind to wander freely, enjoying the beauty of nature. At times, his mind would slip into more serious thoughts.

He enjoyed watering the plants and watching them grow. Once when the area was affected by serious drought, water became scarce. Naanu wanted to dig a new well to end water scarcity. He identified a spot not too far from the Vayalvaram home. One day the boys began to dig the well.

While the digging was going on, they struck a strange object right at the center. One by one the boys tried their best to remove it so that they could proceed with the digging. However hard they tried, their attempts were unsuccessful. Then came Naanu's turn. After closing his eyes for a few moments, apparently in silent prayer, he moved towards the object and applied all his might in the attempt to pull it out. With a jerking sound, a *trishul* or trident shaped object came out of the earth. Soon water began gushing out from the hole. Immediately, the boys rushed back home to share the news with their parents. Nobody knew where Naanu was. He was not to be seen for days. Naanu returned home after a few days. By then the event was out of everyone's mind.

To this day, severe droughts have failed to dry up the well even once. It is still used by the neighbouring community in Chempazhanty as a permanent water supply and is popularly nicknamed as the "Trishul Well".

The Young Mystic

To uncle Krishnan Vaidyar, it was evident that Naanu was different from other young men of his age. Even though he was adored by all in the family, Naanu felt a need to escape from the familiar surroundings that reminded him of worldly attachments. His disciplined habits and ascetic lifestyle resembled that of a *sanyasin*.

By then Naanu had developed the habit of wandering in unfamiliar places. He used to visit various villages in the vicinity of his home as well as faraway places. Occasionally he stayed in the homes of close relatives. Even in adverse circumstances, he imposed a certain discipline on himself as far as his daily routine was concerned. After his morning bath, he would cover his forehead with holy ashes, read the scriptures and meditate. Afterwards, he used to visit nearby temples. He was always vigilant in safeguarding his body, mind and spirit.

Those who came to know him realized that Naanu possessed certain unique characteristics. Some teased by calling him *Naanu Bhaktan* or devout Naanu. He preferred not to stay in one place for more than a few days. During these expeditions, he also found time to study lessons in Sanskrit and read the scriptures. His uncles and parents tried very hard to bring Naanu back to the life of a normal young man but their attempts failed to get the desired result.

When Naanu was around eighteen years, he again went missing for some time. His parents and uncles first thought he was on one of his expeditions. As his absence got prolonged, they became worried. "What has happened to our son? O' God! Please guard him wherever he is!" The family prayed earnestly.

Days and weeks passed but there was no trace of Naanu. Then unexpectedly he appeared on the nineteenth day. Everybody was stunned. His face and body were covered with dark scars. "What are those marks on your face? Where were you all these days? What

happened, Naanu?" Uncle Krishnan Vaidyar continued his tirade for a while. Naanu revealed he was seriously afflicted by smallpox.

Among the secluded settlements of Pulayas, not too far from Naanu's home, some people had been affected by smallpox. Except Naanu, few in his neighbourhood were concerned or cared about those poor folks. Most people barely had any contact with the Pulayas and were thus ignorant of the outbreak of the disease. Fearing for life, even relatives abandoned the unfortunate victims. Naanu secretly went to their dwellings and cared for the ones hit by the deadly disease. He prepared a special ointment using the nut of the medicinal tree *marotti* (*Hydnocarpus wightiana*). With his help, many were saved from the clutches of death. Naturally, Naanu became the next victim.

While Naanu was sick, he stayed alone in a secluded temple in the middle of a nearby forest. It was in those forests of Chempazhanty that King Marathandavarma fought and killed the rebel forces under the leadership of "Ettuveetil Pillamar." The haunted memories of the blood-stained forest and its dreadful battles were still etched in the minds of villagers. As the rebel soldiers were brutally murdered during the battle, their kith and kin were mercilessly auctioned and sold by the king's men. It was no wonder that people stayed away from the forest area and its isolated temple even during daytime.

To avoid unwanted panic among his family and the spread of the deadly disease, Naanu decided to stay alone during the whole period in that temple. People visited the temple only once a year when it had annual rituals. While staying alone in the temple, Naanu continued his daily rituals and recitals of holy books regardless of the small pox. He survived on food collected from nearby homes at night.

"Who was there in the forest to treat you, my child?" His mother nervously asked.

"Mother Goddess herself cured me of the deadly disease," Naanu replied.

As the young boy coolly offered the narration of events, everybody was filled with fear and horror. Then a sense of secret admiration overwhelmed them.

In those days, people affected by this disease seldom survived as even relatives used to abandon the unfortunate victims. Very rarely the affected ones got any treatment as nobody dared to be in the vicinity of the sick. Naanu's family was surprised by his miraculous escape from the grip of the killer disease. They were perplexed to learn that Naanu didn't receive any specific care from anyone during the critical period. Everyone felt that Naanu was no ordinary being, and many began to believe that he possessed some mystic powers.

Life Away From Home (1876-79)

A Promising Scholar

// ATaanu, can you explain these Sanskrit lines to me?" One

> day, uncle Krishnan Vaidyar asked his young nephew as he received a letter from a close friend. The letter was in the form of a Sanskrit poetry. Writing letters in poetry was an established mode of correspondence among scholars in those days. Skilled writers artfully used the medium to articulate their wit and wisdom.

Even though a Sanskrit scholar himself, uncle Krishnan Vaidyar couldn't fully grasp the intended meaning of the letter. Naanu read the letter and explained its complex meaning very clearly with relative ease. Krishnan Vaidyar was amazed. His nephew's knowledge and cognitive skills made the scholarly uncle very proud of him.

On another occasion, while trekking through the nearby woods, Krishnan Vaidyar heard a hymn sung by Naanu adoring the child form of Lord Krishna. Captivated by the beauty of the song, the man listened to it in attention. When he located his nephew on one of the low branches of a cashew nut tree, he went to him and fondly asked: "Who composed these beautiful yet meaningful lines, my dear boy?" With a reserved tone of shyness, Naanu admitted that the hymn was composed by him.

Being the senior member of the family, Krishnan Vaidyar was convinced that it was plainly unjust to delay the education of his superbly intelligent nephew. He was determined to find a suitable teacher for Naanu's advanced education. But finding a competent tutor who was willing to admit an Ezhava student for higher studies was not an easy task.

Higher education in those times meant the study of Sanskrit and even non-Brahmins among the *Savamas* did not easily enjoy such rights. For more than a few thousand years, Sanskrit education was kept as the exclusive monopoly of the Brahmins. There were also strict rules that barred higher-caste teachers from admitting "untouchables" for study.

Higher Education in Sanskrit

History, is replete with exceptions. Opportunity never fails to knock on the doors of those most desirous of it. Nearly a hundred miles away from Naanu's home, in the north of Travancore, in the village of Karunagappally, there was a highly prestigious Sanskrit school. For students aspiring for higher education, it was a rare blessing in those days. Kummampally Raman Pillai Asan was the revered teacher of this institution.

Raman Pillai Asan was a moderate as he admitted eligible Ezhava students into his institution at a time of strict caste segregation. He became a renowned scholar in Sanskrit very early in life. Besides being a gifted teacher, he was also well versed in Ayurveda, Astrology and Philosophy. Raman Pillai Asan also authored many notable literary works.

Krishnan Vaidyar, on hearing about this noble teacher, concluded that Raman Pillai Asan's school was well suited for Naanu. So, one day both the uncle and the nephew left Chempazhanthi, and they walked for a few miles and then travelled by boat, passing through many rivers and lakes. The school run by Raman Pillai Asan was situated near the banks of a large lake known as the *Kayamkulam Kayal*. It took more than a few days to reach their final destination.

Naanu was around twenty-one years old at the time and the year was 1877 C.E.

When it was time for Krishnan Vaidyar to leave, he knew his nephew would have to stay at the school for at least a few years. Both had been very close all these years and the uncle was sure he would miss his nephew dearly.

Before leaving, he tried to place some money in Naanu's hands. But Naanu refused to accept it though his uncle tried his best to persuade him to take it.

"I do not see any need for money. Uncle, please keep your money with you." The nephew spoke humbly.

After his uncle left, he was asked by those who witnessed the incident the reason for refusing the money. Even though a very nice and loving person, his uncle was in the habit of spending as little money as possible. Naanu knew that very well. So, he replied, "My uncle is going to feel a great sense of loss because of my long absence from home. I wanted to prevent any further inconvenience the parting of money may have caused."

The institution at Kummampally was unique in many aspects. The school was a model abode of learning in those dark days. Naanu, whose yearning for knowledge was burning like fire, was determined to fully utilize this rare opportunity. He became a disciplined and devoted disciple of Raman Pillai Asan.

There were around sixty students there. They were taught many of the great works of Kalidasa, the Shakespeare of classical Sanskrit literature. Keeping with the norm, as a beginner, Narayanan was taught two stanzas per day from the *Raghuvamsa*, the epic work of Kalidasa that describes the story of Lord Rama's lineage. Soon it was found that the content was quite inadequate for a person of his caliber. After realizing the dilemma of this brilliant and ambitious

disciple, Asan advised Naanu, "Narayanan, you are welcome to attend the classes given to the seniors as well."

Within weeks of joining the school, Raman Pillai Asan assigned Naanu the duty of "chattambi" which means monitor or class leader. Afterwards, for a brief period, he was addressed as Naanu Chattambi. In less than three years Naanu Chattambi became an expert in the classic literary works of Kalidasa and his contemporaries, and also mastered in grammar and language. Though a scholar himself, Raman Pillai didn't mind consulting his most promising student whenever he needed to clarify doubts about the implicit meanings and interpretations of certain complex Sanskrit verses.

Confronting Casteism Face to Face

Although Raman Pillai Asan's School was considered highly progressive for its unconventional acceptance of lower caste students, it still reflected the society's discriminatory attitude. Naanu Chattambi faced many instances where this discrimination was apparent. However, he was able to shield his dignity through his calm demeanour. Sometimes he expressed a few words of wit to make his point. His retaliation to the injustice was often delivered with wisdom and composure. Many times, a simple seemingly innocent gesture was enough to put his stand across.

An overwhelming majority of students who attended Raman Pillai Asan's school were from upper caste communities. Only a few Ezhava students from reputed families had the privilege of attending the school. The classrooms were arranged in such a way that preference was always given to the Brahmins. They sat comfortably on wooden planks in the front rows. Behind them came Nairs and other non-Brahmin *savamas* and they sat on mats spread on the floor. The Ezhava students, since they were considered *untouchables*, had to sit far behind the higher castes on matted coconut leaves.

One day, Naanu Chattambi entered the classroom. Disregarding the caste distinctions, he sat on the wooden plank in the front row. The *savama* students vocally protested and reported the violation to Raman Pillai Asan. They demanded quick disciplinary action against the violator. Hearing their complaint, Raman Pillai Asan advised

Naanu Chattambi to sit on the matted leaves far behind the higher caste students, the place meant for Ezhavas.

Without expressing any hurt to his dignity, he inquired of the teacher whether there was any restriction in breathing the air as well.

"Master! From which direction am I supposed to breathe? Am I supposed to inhale from the East or West? Or, am I supposed to turn to the North or South?"

Hearing the questions, the puzzled classmates looked into each other's eyes.

Naanu Chattambi was skillfully implying the silliness of their demand. He was stating that everyone inhales and exhales the same air regardless of where they sat in the classroom. He implied that it was impossible to discriminate the air that was exhaled by an Ezhava or inhaled by a Brahmin no matter where they sat. If such was the design of Mother Nature, then arguing over one's seating arrangement had no meaning.

Naanu Chattambi was in no mood to yield easily. Yet he didn't seem defiant. He did not say he would not abide by his teacher's instructions. But Raman Pillai Asan was a scholar as well as a gentleman. He understood his disciple. He responded calmly, "Narayanan, sit wherever you choose." Of course, he remained exactly where he was as if nothing had happened.

Some upper castes students and their superstitious parents could not tolerate the presence of Ezhavas among the student body. And they protested against the way the school was functioned. As Raman Pillai Asan did not pay much heed to their cribbing, many upper caste students chose to boycott the school.

Guest of Kerala's Pioneer Philanthropic family

As Raman Pillai's school did not have any boarding facilities, an aristocratic Ezhava family in the neighbourhood provided food and boarding facilities for students. The service was free of cost, thanks to the spirit of charity of the dignified Varanappally family. Many students like Narayanan benefited from the generosity of this family.

The cream of the society in Kerala at that time was among the pupils of Raman Pillai Asan. Many were fortunate enough to enjoy the hospitality of the Varanappally home. Kochukrishna Panicker, its senior head, was not only a person of noble heart but a man of many talents. He was a fan of classic literature and he enthusiastically promoted literary activities among the youths who stayed there.

Kochukrishna Panicker is best remembered for his unique contribution in inaugurating a new avenue in literature for talented personalities of lower caste origin. It was he who paved the way for pioneer Ezhava literary persons such as Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyer and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyer, who were the pride of the downtrodden community in the late 19th century.

The pleasant atmosphere of the Varanappally home provided the perfect setting for deliberating scholarly topics. Narayanan was not one to actively initiate any dialogue or interfere in any discussion. He preferred to be a solitary seeker of knowledge and consciously stayed away from the outgoing style of his classmates.

But whenever there was a debate, Narayanan was the most sought out. Both the opposing teams relied on his wisdom to mediate when they were caught up in arguments. Also, the students who were living at Varanappally regularly assembled during nights and conducted *Purana-parayana* or recital of verses from Hindu devotional texts. On many such occasions, it was Narayanan's duty to interpret the meaning of those verses.

Narayanan's long stay at Varanappally was not always smooth. During leisure, Narayanan preferred to be alone, pursuing mystical or spiritual experiences while other students engaged in hobbies more usual for their age. Narayanan found satisfaction and joy in comforting and helping the old motherly women folk of the Varanappally household and guiding them in performing devotional practices. Sometimes he recited *Ramayan* or *Bhagavatham* for those ladies. He also volunteered to assist them in performing household duties. He also enjoyed grazing the cows in the open meadows.

Often his fellow students teased and ridiculed him for being different and mounted pressure on him to conform to their ways. Narayanan used to have long hair during his student days and he

never attempted to kill the lice. In those days also, he was considerate to even the most insignificant creatures. He would lie under sun on hot sand for some time, and the lice immediately escaped seeking cooler pastures.

At Varanappally, during dinner, the students were usually served rice and fish. Being a strict vegetarian, eating fish was unthinkable for Narayanan. The elderly lady serving them food avoided giving him fish. Whenever mischievous students happened to sit next to him they would hide pieces of fish in Narayanan's rice. Sensing the unusual, he would avoid the food altogether. The kind lady would separately serve food to Narayanan

Many of the students could not understand the true personality of Narayanan. They tried in vain to break him away from his habits. Some became jealous of him as it was clear to them that he was the favourite of the teacher as well as members of the Varanappally family. Yet Narayanan remained undisturbed by their childish conduct.

Altruism in Action

While at Varanappally, Narayanan occasionally pursued his passion for travelling to places far and near. Sometimes he wandered through the neighbouring areas, enjoying its greenery and beauty. He also used these opportunities to thoroughly examine any plant on the way that warranted his attention. Being a member of a family of Ayurvedic physicians, Narayanan was familiar with the medicinal properties of many plants. He would chew the leaves of certain plants for taste and sometimes swallow its juice. He would consciously evaluate its effect on his body. His aptitude for observation enhanced his practical knowledge on the medicinal value of many plants that most people viewed as mere weeds.

On those expeditions, a Pulaya youth of his age, occasionally accompanied him. Over time they became close friends. This man had been working as a menial labourer for the Varanappally household for some time. During one of those days, he got seriously affected by leprosy, and stopped coming to Varanappally. None of Narayanan's friends noticed the absence of the young man. As soon as Narayanan

came to know about his illness, he began visiting his friend secretly at night. He treated the sick man with a specific ayurvedic ointment made from certain medicinal plants.

Narayanan's friends happened to notice his empty bed during odd hours of the night. Naturally, the young men made wild assumptions about Narayanan's disappearances. They suspected that Narayanan was having an affair, and took Narayanan's aloofness to worldly matters as not genuine. To confirm their assumption, they made plans to spy on Narayanan. So, one night they followed Narayanan as he stepped out. The gang wanted to trap him.

They watched impatiently as Narayanan entered a small hut. Inside they saw a young person on the floor covered in rags. The condition inside the hut seemed worse than a cow shed. To the astonishment of the young men, they heard Narayanan comforting the ailing youth of Pulaya caste. Narayanan's friends didn't know that the young man was suffering from leprosy. The poor man had sore wounds in many parts of his body. Without knowing that his friends were secretly watching him, Narayanan attentively applied the medicinal ointment he had brought with him on the wounds of his destitute friend. He also left some Ayurvedic medicine with him for future use.

Narayanan's friends were stunned. As they realized their folly, they felt a deep sense of shame for what they did. Soon after, the men became convinced of Narayanan's distinctive personality and began to admire him. They were astounded by Narayanan's profound spirit of care and compassion. They found it hard to grasp his strength of will in defying the illogical social customs and norms that for ages had prohibited the natural interaction among people of different castes.

Gradually, the young man recovered from the deadly disease. Narayanan was glad that his secret trips to the hut of his lowly friend were fruitful in the end. Caste distinctions or superstitious rules didn't matter to him. To him, the human race was his caste and humanity was his religion.

Two Hungry Dogs and a Moral Dilemma

Another experience occurred at Varanappally, which showed his wisdom while facing blatant injustice. Whenever Narayanan had his meal, a dog appeared before him looking for leftovers. It was small and weak and Narayanan took pity on it. He began happily sharing a sizeable portion of his meal with it.

Suddenly, another dog began to show up. The newcomer was big and strong. Narayanan continued to share his food with the small dog. But the big dog, a bully, simply pushed away the small dog and hastily consumed the food. The small one stared helplessly in frustration at his rival. It also looked at Narayanan, hoping for an intervention in its favour.

But Narayanan did not take any attempt to chase away the big dog. He just couldn't stone the big dog for its encroachment. Whenever the small dog looked at him for help, Narayanan simply gazed at the hungry creature with heartfelt sympathy. Even though Narayanan was distressed by the conduct of the big dog, he could not hate it.

The episode reminded him of the pitiable plight of numerous disadvantaged human beings around him. Those destitute ones were cursed to live in a society replete with rampant injustice, widespread inequality and utter cruelty. Narayanan was convinced that only a moral transition within the individual was the ultimate solution to the ills of the society. But how do we achieve that? His thoughtful mind pondered as the days passed.

A Few Hymns Borne Out of Mystic Experiences

When Narayanan was a student at Varanappally, he would meditate for hours during the middle of night. He was said to be a worshipper of Lord Krishna in those days. On a few occasions, he was seen running madly as if he was chasing somebody. To the inquiry of curious onlookers, he would say he was playing with *Balakrishna* or Krishna in the child form.

One day, Narayanan was seen running wildly through the open fields. His emotional expressions and physical actions tended to

indicate that he was chasing someone. People who saw him were surprised as they could not see anyone else. After a while, he suddenly stopped at the bank of a pond, lost consciousness and fell. When he regained consciousness, the senior member of the Varanappally family inquired about the incident. In response, a beautiful hymn flowed from him. It gushed out like a mountain stream, filled with mystic beauty and vivid imagery. That instantly composed hymn later came to be known as *Sree Krishna Darshanam*.

Raman Pillai Asan, Narayanan's teacher, was among the crowd. He understood instantly the significance of Narayanan's words of ecstasy. The pious teacher was overjoyed to hear the lively description of Lord Krishna through Narayanan's beautiful verse. A genuine admiration towards his unique disciple began to flow from his heart.

While the curious onlookers were watching, Raman Pillai Asan rushed towards Narayanan and embraced him. Later Narayanan explained that Lord Krishna, his mystic friend, had appeared before him in his adolescent form and they played together as intimate friends. According to Narayanan, as they were chasing each other, young Krishna jumped into the pond and disappeared.

Raman Pillai Asan requested Narayanan to compose a hymn glorifying the Lord so that devotees could visualize His image. Narayanan consented, and thus was born *Sree Vasudevashtakam*, another beautiful devotional hymn with vivid descriptions of Lord Krishna.

Gajendramoksham, another devotional hymn on Lord Vishnu, was composed around the same time. During those days, he composed a few hymns in praise of deities such as Lord Shiva, Vinayaka and Guha, the popular gods of the Hindu pantheon. Some were written based on the request of the older women folk of Varanappally. Those hymns, filled with melodious rhythm, replete with vivid imagery and pregnant with symbolic meanings, tried to convey a higher sense of spirituality.

It is safe to assume that those hymns were born out of his deep contemplative experiences and divine intuitions. They were more than just the product of creative genius.

Returning Home

For the last two years, he was the most admired member of the Varanappally household. The knowledge and wisdom he acquired through years of rigorous study significantly contributed towards his transformation as a young and authentic scholar. His solitary experiments with mysticism, religious rituals and meticulous meditation revealed his future leanings. His unique personality was acknowledged by peers as well as other senior members. He was the centre of attention in every scholastic debate. Whether the discussion was on philosophy, religion, logic or literature, the participants always looked forward to Narayanan's contribution.

Being Narayanan's teacher, Raman Pillai Asan felt there was nothing left for him to teach his favourite student. Narayanan also felt an inner yearning to enter the next phase of his destined journey. The knowledge he acquired was inadequate to quench the longing of his inquiring soul. Even though he had mastered all the subjects beyond the scope of that noble institution, Narayanan felt that there was so much more for him to know and experience.

During this time Narayanan was infected with a severe intestinal disease. He was around twenty-four years old then. Even though local physicians tried their best, his condition only grew worse day by day. The pleasant atmosphere of the Varanappally home soon turned into chaos. Finally, his relatives were informed of the gravity of the illness and they arrived to take him home. As the tired and severely sick Narayanan bid farewell, tears rolled down the cheeks of the onlookers. The elders of Varanappally wept like children while the youths tried hard to contain their emotions.

A blissful chapter in his life thus came to an abrupt close.

Preparations (1879-82)

Taking Literacy to the Destitute

For the next few months, he was given ayurvedic medications prescribed by uncle Krishnan Vaidyer. Due to this ample care at home, Narayanan slowly recovered from the illness. After a while, he regained full health.

Even though he was young, healthy, handsome and educated, Narayanan's detached character caused some discomfort in his family. He woke up early in the morning, meditated for a while, and then recited devotional texts. Afterwards, he visited nearby temples. Sometimes he was seen immersed in thought for long hours. He began visiting places far and near and returned home after many days. To the worried family that had many hopes for this young man, this was

not a pleasant scenario. As they had always feared the innate ascetic in young Narayanan, plans were in progress to keep him within the family fold.

Educated men in those days conducted single-teacher schools or *kudipallikoodam* to educate the younger generation in their communities. Because of severe caste segregation, only upper castes had easy access to education. Often, traditional educational institutions were associated with temples, and lower castes were prohibited by law from entering its premises. So, it was not an easy task for a person of lower caste to gain basic education.

Fortunately, scholars from non-Brahmin communities, especially Nairs and Ezhavas, who possessed knowledge, voluntarily ran a parallel education system through a network of single-teacher *kudipallikoodam*. Often times, the school was nothing but a humble hut made of clay wall and thatched roof. Some schools were conducted in the open air under trees.

The teaching involved learning of alphabets and words termed *nilathezhuthu*. Fine sand was collected and spread over the floor, and students drew letters in it with the index finger of the right hand while the left hand was applied to erase the writing. After learning the basics, students were offered grammar and a few classical texts in Sanskrit. The students usually sat on the bare ground while the *asan* or teacher sat on a seat, a mat of leaves or animal skin.

Narayanan's father and uncles were all such teachers. Often this was a free exercise, as these noble minds considered it a privilege as well as an obligation to disseminate knowledge. It was the network of *kudipallikoodam* that kept alive the flow of literacy among the marginalized communities for many generations in Kerala.

To Narayanan, the promise of *kudipallikoodam* offered a greater meaning as it provided him the opportunity to direct his talents and abilities in service of the society. Naturally, he enjoyed teaching the young children. Besides, it provided him an opportunity to be away from home and pursue the independent life that he aspired to lead.

In no time, Narayanan's reputation as a model teacher and a person of noble character was well established in and around Chempazhantty. He was reverently addressed as "Naanu Asan" or Teacher Naanu. Soon he began teaching students in other neighbourhoods as well.

He sought out those neglected children who were traditionally left out from the process of education, giving them the rare opportunity to learn.

Due to the harshness of the social customs of those days, certain suppressed castes such as Pulayas and Parayas seldom attended *kudipallikoodam*, but Naanu Asan was determined. "If they cannot come to the school, I will bring the school to them," was his resolve. He made regular trips to their lowly dwellings and tried earnestly to educate interested youngsters of those communities. As they were denied education for centuries by the caste-ridden society, then-gratitude was boundless.

Besides providing the marginalized the opportunity to experience the light and taste of knowledge, Naanu Asan guided them in many other ways. Disregarding the established social customs, he engaged with these poor families very closely. During the regular visits to their homes, he tended their old and cared for their sick. He provided them with advice on matters such as cleanliness, devotion and prayer. To their increasing surprise, he also willingly shared their food.

His close association with the wretched folk did not go down well within his community or with elders of his own family. The seniors felt they were being disgraced by Naanu. His parents feared rebuke from authorities for the purposeful violation of the caste rules. But Naanu Asan ignored the objections and defied those who discouraged his interactions with those Dalit families.

He gradually spread his network of *kudipallikoodam* from the outskirts of Chempazhanty to other villages in the southern region of Kerala such as Kadakkavur, Meerankadavu and Anchuthengu. While continuing his service as a teacher, Naanu Asan also followed his passion for philosophical pursuits and spiritual quests. In those days, he spent many nights immersed in prayer or meditation.

The stay in places away from home provided him the perfect environment to pursue his solitary style of life. To him, *kudipallikoodam* was more than a venue for teaching. Sometimes devotional activities were conducted at the facility and students were encouraged to participate.

During that time, he used to teach *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the holiest books of Hindus, at the Jnaneswaram temple at Anjuthengu. Naanu

Asan was around twenty-five years old, healthy and handsome. This was a time of intense challenges to his ascetic way of life, and he faced it from many quarters. It seemed that he was being seriously tested by nature on his vows of celibacy. He had to fight hard to win over the overpowering forces within him.

As he was fighting a crucial battle of his life, he sat in meditation and prayed earnestly to Lord Siva to rescue him from the temptations of material desires. His feelings at that time were depicted beautifully in *Shivasathakam*, a long poem of exemplary beauty. Certain verses of this unique poem reflect his heartfelt request to Lord Siva, the Supreme Lord of Detachment. He prayed for courage to detach himself from worldly entanglements.

Trials of Life

On many nights, he walked continuously through remote areas for miles until the next morning. When too tired, he would sleep through the next day. He would go without food for days. When he felt hungry, he would beg or find leftovers here and there. He abandoned his daily routines and disciplined way of life. He became lean and purposely allowed the body to weaken. His unconventional lifestyle caught the attention of many who knew him and they felt sorry for him. They feared that he had lost his senses.

These grueling practices seemed to reflect the trials of a young and healthy man who was determined to lead a life of celibacy. Severely disciplining the body and mind through extreme methods was traditionally used by holy personalities to extinguish the fires of material desires. For almost two years, he engaged his life in this manner.

We can imagine the intensity of emotions passing through his mind. All along, he knew that he had a greater calling in life. To pursue it he had to make some hard and painful decisions sooner or later. He longed to pursue a spiritual and meditative path and possessed an inner urge to experience the Divine. Since early childhood, he had been enchanted by the serenity of wilderness and had abhorred the sound and furies of material life.

Gradually, he began to skip teaching for days and spent long hours alone in abandoned temples or other remote locations engaging in introspection. Contrary to the expectations of his parents and relatives, his life as a teacher also failed to deter his natural disdain for material life. The restlessness that had been haunting him for the last few years only grew stronger with the passage of time.

As Naanu Asan was engaging his life as a curious seeker trying to discern the realities behind the mysteries of life, his family was actively trying to pull him towards material life. "How can I confine myself to the mundane life of an ordinary person?" he thought. He was conscious of his innate instincts as a seeker of Truth and spirituality. His awakened soul yearned for nothing but the ultimate solace of infinite wisdom.

Yet, he realized that following the call of his soul could wreak havoc on the lives of many who were close to him.

"However hard, strong and thick, the walls of material lure have to be torn down! The links of bondage have to be broken! How can I walk freely by carrying those burdens? Whatever the cost, I need to clear the path for pursuing my soul's urge. No other way to further the journey towards liberation".

"But how can I reach there? Who will guide me? What is the way?"

"Millions of people around me are suffering! Their plight is worse than that of cattle! Why? Are they not human beings?"

"Who will save them from their hopeless lives?"

"What is the meaning of this life?"

These were the questions that resonated in his mind.

He was experiencing a major crisis of conscience.

Naanu Asan was around twenty-seven years old then. As the family sensed his sway, they hurriedly began plans to tie him down. His relatives secretly arranged his marriage. Kali, a cousin of Naanu Asan, was picked as his bride. Thus, Naanu Asan's marriage was fixed without his consent. In those days, parents decided the marriage of their children, often without the prior knowledge of the bride and groom.

While Naanu Asan's family was busy making preparations for the marriage ceremony, the young man was nowhere near home.

He was wandering from place to place, battling his agitated mind. Consequently, in the absence of the groom, his sisters tied the sacred knots on his behalf. Thus, the marriage ceremony was completed in his absence. The practice of tying the knot by the groom's sister was a common practice in those days.

Nobody knew for sure where Naanu Asan was at the time of his marriage. The lonely shores of the Arabian Sea or the wilderness of local forests provided him the perfect settings for engaging in his internal interrogations. There he remained lost in thought, forgetting the world around him.

Free at Last!

For the next few months following the marriage, Naanu Asan did not visit his home. His prolonged absence worried his family. He was also conscious of their concerns. Being the only son of his parents, he was aware of their expectations and he often sympathized with them.

He also contemplated the consequences his decisions would cause. But compromising with his conscience was not a choice for him. His intense desire for leading the life of an ascetic was so strong that it permeated all his deeds and thoughts.

He was vowed to celibacy as he sought complete freedom from worldly affairs. His goal in life was to experience eternal happiness and he was determined to abandon all material pleasures for the success of his spiritual pursuit. Through poems and hymns, he tried to express his inner passions for spirituality and contemplative experiences. Like Buddha and other seekers of Truth who left home and abandoned worldly pleasures, Naanu Asan also embarked on a solitary journey.

To the surprise and delight of his worried parents, Naanu Asan abruptly appeared at his home one day. Kali, who was brought into his family as his wife, affectionately brought him some fruits. He received them kindly.

As the concerned relatives anxiously looked on, he said calmly to the young woman, "Every being has a unique role in the scheme of things. Once we recognize that purpose in life, it is incumbent upon us to diligently follow that obligation. This is nothing but the divine

design of the Almighty. My inner callings don't allow me to lead the mundane life of a common person. So, please understand and allow me to pursue my life's mission. Let only good things happen to you!" Then he walked away with calm but firm steps ending the short-lived relationship forever.

Understandably, there was a hushed silence following this shocking development. No doubt, it was a depressing moment to the assembled members of his family. As some burst into tears, a few tried to comfort the abandoned bride. The equally stunned young lady stared for a while in the direction of her husband. A few among the gathering condemned the young man's conduct. Many thought that Naanu had lost his mind.

Few people among them realized the significance of that epic moment or its ramifications for the future. Within a few days, Kali returned to her home. A few months later, Kuttiamma, Naanu Asan's mother, passed away, cutting the family ties further. His father also moved away from home sometime later. Thus, Naanu's family life became a closed chapter, freeing him to attend his calling.

Journey Begins

"Who am I?

What is life for?

How can one experience God?

What is the secret of this universe?

Why do people suffer?

What is the reason for so much discontent in society?

How do we attain perfect happiness and eternal bliss?"

The young man's restless mind was inquisitively searching for answers to these profound questions.

His experiences of living in a caste-ridden society prompted him to seek answers to other issues of his time as well. "What is caste? Who is a Brahmin? Why is there untouchability? Why do the poor suffer? What is right and what is just?" As Naanu Asan's mind echoed with those unanswered questions, he found none to share his thoughts. It seemed to him that the world was immersed in ignorance.

What appeared to be true didn't make any sense to him. The customs that were considered the norm for centuries were unacceptable to his intellect. He regarded the many existing rules in society as plainly wrong. The pathetic conditions of people around him who were destined to lead a life of misery disturbed his peace of mind.

During his wanderings Naanu Asan visited many temples and shrines especially associated with the Tamil Saiva saints. He traveled long distances without any specific destination and cared little for his look or attire. Some treated him with contempt and tried to hurt him. Their conduct had no impact on his mind. On the way, many people became attracted to him by his divine appearance and soothing presence. They began to address him reverently as Swami.

As an ascetic, Naanu Swami wandered day and night alone through the rough and narrow trails covering many parts of southern India. He walked many miles barefoot. He consumed food only to sustain himself and would seek offering from homes on the way. He quenched his thirst by taking water from wells. When felt tired, he would rest under a tree. He would sit there for hours lost in thoughts.

During his wanderings, Naanu Swami was not particular about anything. He stayed among the fishermen community for brief periods. A few Muslim families treated him with devotion. He stayed with them for a while and shared whatever food they prepared including fish. At night, he would sleep on open fishing boats until the fishermen woke him up early in the morning.

He would then help them push the boat into the sea. The boat touched by Naanu Swami would fetch a good harvest from the sea, and so there grew an assumption among the fishermen about the divine powers of the young ascetic. They competed among themselves to get his help to push their boats into the sea.

During his stay with the fishermen community, Naanu Swami felt their innocent love and genuine reverence. They toiled day and night for a living. But their income was meager and unsteady most of the time. During the rainy season when the sea was rough, they had no livelihood. Their families starved. They had no formal education as the prevailing customs prohibited them from getting educated. The men and women lived in ignorance, simply accepting or cursing their fate.

The Path of a Yogi (1882-86)

A Dive into the Ocean of Philosophy

Naanu Swami continued to wander along the seashores of southern Kerala for many months. When he was tired he would find a secluded location to rest enjoying the cool sea breeze. He would watch the sky and listen to the steady rhythm of the waves. He was always fascinated by the infinite vastness and serenity of the sea and deeply felt its mystical influence on him.

Many of his philosophical poems and hymns are replete with the symbolic images of the sea. To him, the vast ocean symbolized life that was marred by unknown and hidden challenges. Whenever he felt restless or sought answers to the secrets of Nature, he returned to its shores like a child seeking a mother's lap for solace.

He would stay immersed in meditation for days and nights, seeking answers to the questions that agitated his mind. It was during this time that he composed his early contemplative revelations. His intuitions and interpretations on profound ponderings such as God, soul, mind, and *maya* or illusion were depicted in his writings. Even though most of his writings of this period were lost, a few works such as *Chijjada Chintakam* and *Daiva Chinthanam* fortunately survived, providing valuable insights into his thoughts during the early phases of his philosophical and spiritual musings.

From the beginning, human beings have been inquiring about the mysteries of the universe. They've wondered about the complex features of this world including the earth, rain, wind, sky, sea, sun, moon and the stars. The presence of countless types of organism such as plants and animals fascinated them. Not just the sages, seers and philosophers of olden times, but even ordinary men and women have been intrigued by the mysteries of the universe.

Like many ancient sages, Naanu Swami often thought about God. Indian philosophical doctrine perceives *Brahman* as the only Reality and views everything else like a mirage that appears to be real but does not exist. Being a scholar in India's ancient school of thought, to him those theological concepts were often the subject of his introspection.

But he was also perplexed by the everyday reality of life. Even those who pretended to profess the knowledge of *Brahman* never missed a chance to ill-treat *Brahman's* creations which by theory were not distinct from the creator Himself.

"How can one perceive everything as *Brahman* and then contradict its very essence in their interactions with others?"

It was a paradox that caused him much disturbance. So, while Naanu Swami was engaged in the process of unravelling the reality of *Brahman* in the form of *Chijjada Chintakam*, the struggle and striving of millions of *Brahman's* creations stood out as a big puzzle for him to solve.

A Search into the Truths of *Brahman*

Being a person on spiritual pursuit, Naanu Swami's reflection on *Brahman* and His Truth as described in *Chijjada Chintakam* seemed an attempt to reaffirm his philosophical convictions.

In *Katho Upanishad*, there is a story of a boy, Nachiketa, and his arduous journey in pursuit of answers to many such mysteries. The *Katho Upanishad* is one of most prominent and influential among the ancient books on Vedic wisdom known as the *Upanishads*. It was translated into Persian in the 17th century and was later translated into Latin and to other European languages. Western scholars including Max Muller, Edwin Arnold, and Arthur Schopenhauer studied it and made its message the theme of their various writings. The American thinker and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson also read it and appreciated its philosophical value.

Even though young, Nachiketa was unwilling to compromise with his conscience as he witnessed the hypocrisy of his religiously observant father. His father was performing a holy ritual that included a ceremonial act of charity. Nachiketa wondered why his father was giving away worthless things in the guise of charity.

As the boy questioned the unethical nature of his father, the ill-tempered man got agitated and cursed him to die. Unmoved by the dreadfulness of the curse, the innocent boy willingly left his father's abode in search of Yama, the god of death. Nachiketa had no fear and he voluntarily travelled through unfriendly and hostile terrain, and patiently waited for days at the door of Yama to submit himself to death. Impressed by the boy's unwavering determination and fearlessness, Yama offered him several boons.

As Nachiketa was not a usual child, he did not seek any material boons. Instead, he insisted on answers to the hidden secrets of life and death. Yama tried his best to test the boy's resolve. Yama's counteroffers of material wealth and other bounties had no effect on Nachiketa. So, for the first time, answers to the most intrinsic secrets of life and death were revealed by Yama to Nachiketa. The metaphysical dialogue epitomizes the core philosophy of Indian spirituality.

Just like Nachiketa, the young Naanu Swami also wanted answers to the many mysteries. The *Chitjjada Chintakam* and *Daiva*

Chinthanam are attempts to answer those intriguing questions. Rather than journeying to Yama for answers, Naanu Asan trekked through a different path. He spent days and nights in remote locations, fully free from external or internal distractions, and dug through the inner layers of his subtle mind to harness its hidden wisdom.

The ancient spiritual traditions of India stipulate in detail the pathway for realizing the truths of *Brahman*. Purifying the mind from diversions is essential to contemplate on Brahman. To achieve this, one needs to discipline the mind to accept everything as part and parcel of *Brahman*. The ideal goal of every human being is to achieve this state of non-duality with the *Brahman*.

According to the metaphysical concepts contemplated in *Chijjada Chinthanam*, the entire manifested universe or *jagath* is divided into two distinct elements known as *chith* and *jada*. *Chith* represents the Absolute Consciousness or Reality. Everything else is *jada*. Everything that consists of the universe, from the atom or an amoeba to gigantic creatures, including an immovable object like a blade of grass or an elephant, is *jada*.

Chith is further defined as the Consciousness that causes knowledge. *Jada* is everything else that is revealed through our senses. From a fine grain of sand to the illusionary veil of *maya* that conceals Brahman or the ultimate Reality, all are generally characterized as *jada*. It is through our senses and by the illusion of *maya* that we experience the material world. As in a dream, our experiences are as real as we experience them. Only when our inner Self awakens to the deeper dimensions of pure Consciousness or Truth, will we realize the illusionary nature of our experiences and perceptions.

Daiva Chinthanam is another poetic narrative by the young seeker to reflect his vision of the multiple layers of the universe. It also dwells on the existence of numerous subtle entities within the universe. While describing his perceptions on the existence of such mystical elements, he discusses their positive and negative attributes. To lead a righteous life, he advises everybody to pay obeisance only to the positive or *sattvic* spiritual powers. He warns about the self-destructive ramifications of deviating from the right path to please the forces of darkness. Unfortunately, during that period such practices were too common among the marginalized communities.

An Exceptional Encounter

After leaving home, Naanu Swami wandered from place to place for more than two years. The journey was a learning expedition as he was able to interact with a wide range of people. He conducted occasional discussions with learned individuals from Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities he met along the way. The books he read and the men he met helped him enrich his knowledge. But his soul yearned for something far greater.

Somehow, he arrived at a bookstore in the heart of Thiruvananthapuram, and occasionally helped the store-owner. The man was kind and provided him with food and shelter. It was during this time that Naanu Swami familiarized himself with many texts on *vedantic* literature such as *Vedanta Jnanavatil Kattilai*. He was fascinated by the Saiva traits of Tamil devotional traditions and studied classics like *Thirukkural*, *Thirumandiram*, *Thiruppukal*, and *Thiruppavai*. Swami also used the opportunity to extensively read many books on *Vedanta*, Indian classical philosophy, in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil.

One day, a visitor to the bookstore turned out to be none other than his old friend Perunnelly Krishnan Vaidyer. They had stayed together at Varanappally home while studying under Raman Pillai Asan. By then, Perunnelly had become an established Ayurvedic physician and had authored many distinguished books.

At a time when Ezhavas and those below them were discouraged from getting even basic education, Perunnelly proved himself a genius in literature. An astounding Sanskrit scholar, he was the first to translate *Abhinjana Sakunthalam*, the epic work of the legendary Kalidasa, from Sanskrit to Malayalam. Even though he won notable recognition and awards from the kings, somehow, he was discouraged from publishing his translation of *Abhinjana Sakunthalam*. Perunnelly's premature death under mysterious circumstances at age thirty-nine was a severe blow to the aspiring writers of the downtrodden community. It was Kerala Varma Valiya Koyithampuran, a member of the ruling family, who later published

his own translation of that epic work first in Malayalam. This made Kerala Varma eligible for the special title *Kerala Kalidasan*.

Accepting Perunnelly's invitation, Naanu Swami gladly accompanied him to his home and stayed there for a while. There as well a golden collection of rare books was awaiting the curious reader. During one of those days, an exceptional encounter occurred. Another ascetic by the name Kunjan Pillai Chatambi, popularly known as Chatambi Swami, came to see Perunnelly. He was a frequent visitor to the Perunnelly home.

Chatambi Swami was an ardent devotee of Lord Subramanya and was proficient in a specific mantra which apparently possesses the power to invoke Subramanya. For that reason, Chatambi Swami was also called *Shanmugha-dasan* or the humble servant of Lord Shanmugha, another name for Lord Subramanya.

Naanu Swami and Chatambi Swami became attached to each other at first sight, like two long lost brothers meeting after a long separation. They became spiritual soul-mates, sharing their experiences and began to learn from each other. Both wandered together in various places in their passionate pursuit of self-realization.

Chatambi Swami was practicing *Hatha Yoga* lessons from Thykkattu Ayyavu, a highly revered *yoga* guru. So, he felt that learning the techniques of *yoga* would help Naanu Swami to further his spiritual path. Chatambi Swami led the aspiring ascetic to Thykkattu Ayyavu, and the *yoga* guru was immediately impressed with the potential of his new disciple.

The Mystic Power of Yoga

According to the Indian concept, the inherent spiritual energy in a person is locked in the body. Harnessing that energy is a must for making systematic progress in the spiritual path. Yoga means union, which implies the union with Brahman or God, the absolute being that pervades all beings.

Indian sages believed that the source of salvation of the soul was internal. As long as the mind, body and the senses are immersed in ignorance, an individual will not be able to attain higher consciousness. On the basic level, yoga helps a person to purify and

strengthen the body. A purified and perfect body system is essential to calm and control the mind. A controlled mind is the basis of all material and spiritual success in life.

The ancient rishis developed systematic yoga techniques to progress on the path of spirituality and to realize the true nature of one's soul. Hatha Yoga is a fundamental approach in this regard. Even though yoga exercises constitute a preliminary step in this regard, its ultimate goal is to accomplish this union.

Hatha Yoga practice includes specific *asanas* or ideal sitting positions and *pranayama* or controlled breathing exercises. Systematic learning of *asanas* is a prerequisite for engaging in *pranayama*. Hatha Yoga also involves various exercises to cleanse the body along with *mudras* or unique gestures.

Pranayama literally means stretching the breath. For human beings, the average length for inhalation and exhalation is four seconds. Through *Pranayama* a *sadhaka* would be able to prolong the length to twelve seconds or more for inhalation as well as exhalation. Various techniques of Hatha Yoga including *Pranayama* enable the practitioner to eliminate the accumulated impurities from the body.

This purification process would energize the whole body. As the *sadhaka* or practitioner advances through the higher stages of Hatha Yoga, the individual would be able to win over the senses, perfectly control the mind, excel in the skills of observation, exert power to restrain the functions of the body and finally attain a state of internal harmony. Upon perfecting this ability, *sadhakas* would achieve higher degrees of concentration and possibly certain *siddhis* or mystic powers.

It is generally believed that procuring *siddhis* or mystical skills may enable *sadhakas* to perform supernatural deeds. Such unique personalities are traditionally known as *Siddhas*. To a normal person, their deeds would appear as miracles. India has been a bastion of such mystic personalities since time immemorial. The tradition continues. It is believed that, even now, there are many such mystic personalities in India, especially in the various cave-ashrams in the snow-clad mountains of the Himalayas.

Hatha Yoga Initiation

A *sadhaka* who desires to practice these techniques requires the active guidance of a learned practitioner, at least in the initial stages. Thycattu Ayyavu Swamikal was an expert in Hatha Yoga, a specific form of Raja Yoga. Chattambi Swamikal was one of the earlier disciples of Ayyavu. So, when he took Naanu Swami to Thycattu Ayyavu Swamikal for learning Hatha Yoga, Ayyavu directed Chattambi Swami to guide Naanu Swami in its practice.

It was believed that Ayyavu Swamikal possessed mystical powers through the intense practice of yoga. He led a spiritual life even though he was married and worked as an official in the government of the Maharaja of Travancore. Ayyavu Swamikal was also an ardent devotee of Lord Subramanya and he possessed *Balasubramanya mantra* to invoke the Lord. In south India, Subramanya, the son of Lord Shiva and the favourite deity of the Dravidian tradition is popularly known as *Muruga*. He is revered for his compassionate nature and special concern for the downtrodden.

While the yoga practice was progressing, Ayyavu Swamikal called Naanu Asan to his side one day, and then graciously whispered the mystic *mantra* into his ear as he was pleased with the exceptional qualifications of the young yogi.

As a seeker of Truth, attaining Siddhis or exhibiting them in public was not the goal of Naanu Swami. He was not swayed by the lure of mystical power. Siddhis could often act as hindrance to spiritual progress as those who possess such abilities may be tempted to exhibit the mystical skills for self-promotion. Since early childhood Naanu Swami had aspired for higher self-realization. The Hatha Yoga techniques he learned from Ayyavu only intensified his yearnings.

Ayyavu Swamikal recognized the divine spark in Swami. He was also convinced of the intensity of the young seeker's spiritual urges. Naanu Swami mastered Hatha Yoga including proper *asanas* and *pranayama* exercises essential for prolonged meditation. Through Hatha Yoga, he gained a purified and energized body as well as a calm and stable mind. So, Ayyavu Swamikal advised solitary meditation as the path for Naanu Swami's upward spiritual journey.

On the Peak of Marutwamala Hills

Like the ancient rishis or sages who conducted intense meditation in remote caves or humble huts in dense forests, Naanu Swami wandered through the southern coastal regions of Kerala. He walked restlessly in search of a secluded location inaccessible to normal people. He travelled many nights and days disregarding the hot sun and the rain. At times, he slept on sea shores or in temple premises. Finally, he reached Marutwamala.

The young seeker was around twenty-nine years old then.

Marutwamala is an uninhabited hill near Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India. Marutwamala is also known as *Marunnu-mala*, which means a treasure hill of medicinal plants. The mountain that stood around 1,400 feet above sea level is covered with bushes, small trees and medicinal plants. The remote area was also home to poisonous snakes and wild animals.

There is an interesting story in Ramayana behind the formation of Marutwamala. At one stage of the epic battle between the forces of Rama and Ravana, Rama and his brother Lakshman lost consciousness. They were hit by a deadly arrow shot by Indrajit, the son of the demon king Ravana. Fortunately, Jambavan, a revered chief of the *Vanaras*, a race of human-monkeys who were allies of Rama, knew the right medicine to revive them. But to make the medicine, he needed *Mrita-Sanjivani*, *Vishalaya-karani*, *Suvama-karani* and *Sandhani*, four celestial herbs that were available only in the Himalayas.

Jambavan instructed Hanuman, the heroic devotee of Rama who belonged to the *Vanara* race, to proceed to Mount Rishaba, an auspicious peak in the Himalayas, to fetch the herbs. Hanuman immediately left the battlefield of Lanka and flew to Himalayas with his mystical powers. He landed at Mount Rishaba where the herbs grew in abundance. Without wasting any time to search and collect the specific plants, he uprooted the entire mountain and rushed back to the battlefield. Before reaching Lanka, a part of the mountain broke off and fell near the shore of the Indian Ocean. According to legend, this part of the mountain came to be known as Marutwamala.

After reaching the mountain, Naanu Swami trekked through the thick and thorny bushes, and then he found a cave at its zenith. It appeared to Swami the perfect place to meditate, sheltered from rain, wind and sun.

On top of the hill, in between the gap of two huge rocks, hidden by bushes, he found a small fountain of pure spring water. The leaves of certain plants as well as roots and fruits provided him food during his long stay there.

From the top, he could see the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, and sometimes he watched the sea for hours, enjoying the chilly breeze. The sound of the steady rhythm of waves was a melodious background as the young ascetic engaged in long meditation. Sometimes he meditated for days without taking food or water. Gradually, he turned slim, his thick black beard grew long and his face glowed radiantly.

It was later reported by earlier biographers that tigers gave him company as Naanu Swami was lost in deep meditation. He was not afraid of wild animals and poisonous snakes, and lived with them in full harmony as members of a close-knit family. "If you feel a genuine concern and connection towards all beings, there is no need to fear even wild animals," he used to say about the experience.

An Unexpected Guest in the Midnight Hour

For nearly four years, Naanu Swami remained in the hills of Marutwamala, undisturbed by any human contact. One night, he felt very hungry as he returned to consciousness after days of intense meditation.

It was about midnight and it was impossible for him to gather fruits or roots during that odd hours. However, he came out of the cave and sat on a rock under the dim light of the half-moon, listening to the sound of distant sea waves. The wind was blowing, making the branches of the trees sway. The occasional howling of wild animals pierced the otherwise calm atmosphere.

While Naanu Swami was seated there, he heard some footsteps. He looked in that direction and saw in the dim moonlight an elderly

leper coming towards him. The man had with him a packet of food wrapped in a palm leaf.

The leper told the Swami "I feel very hungry and I can tell that you are too. Come and enjoy the food I have brought." He opened the package and placed the leaf between them. Soon they both started eating the roasted rice flakes.

The food tasted so great to Naanu Swami that he forgot everything else. He was very hungry, and this was the first time he had eaten after days of fasting. Upon finishing the meal, Naanu Swami raised his head to inquire more about his guest. To his surprise, the leper was nowhere to be seen. Swami searched around a while but there was no trace of him.

When they were both busy consuming the food, Naanu Swami was only conscious about his hunger and nothing else. Afterwards, he tried to reflect on the mystery that occurred in the middle of night.

"How did the old man who was badly affected by leprosy climb the hill that was so steep?

How did he limp through the thick woods and find the way to the top at that midnight hour?

Why wasn't he afraid of wild animals or poisonous snakes?

Then again, how did he know that I was hungry?"

Naanu Swami remembered that the old man's fingers were badly disfigured by the severity of the disease. Why and how had this sick man disappeared so fast? Naanu Swami was now convinced that this was not humanly possible. He sat on the rock for the rest of the night in meditation.

In later years, Naanu Swami explained this unique and mystic experience to his close disciples.

"It was nobody other than Lord Shiva. The Lord made the numinous appearance to show that He was pleased."

That was the reflection of his disciples upon hearing the episode directly from their revered master.

The incident also resembled the story of the legendary meeting between Lord Siva and sage Sankara who lived during the 8th century.

According to Indian mythology, Lord Shiva is the divine force among the Hindu Trinity in charge of creative destruction of beings.

Lord Shiva, the primordial god, is considered the foremost yogi who conducts the life of an ascetic and resides on Mount Kailash in the Himalayas.

Sree Sankara, the proponent of *advaita* theory or non-duality, once demanded an approaching *Chandala* or a person of lower caste to move away from his way. Sankara was on the way to take a dip in holy river Ganges, and was trying to avoid caste-pollution from the lowly man who was about to cross his path. Pathetically, this incident was said to be taken place long after he had promulgated the theory of *advaita* which establishes that each individual self is not different from the infinite Brahman.

But the wise Chandala was in no mood to yield. When questioned by the stranger on the inconsistency between his teachings and actions, Sankara realized the folly of his ignorant behaviour and apologized. Later Sankara expressed his convictions in the form of a great philosophical poem known as *Manisha Panchakam*. According to legend, it was Lord Shiva, disguising as the Chandala, who tested Sankara.

Unlike Sankara, Naanu Swami succeeded in his first trial as he naturally felt the oneness even with that dreadful stranger. Naanu Swami felt no fuss in eating together from the same dish even though the person was badly disfigured with the advanced stages of leprosy. The young ascetic had already attained the realm of *advaita* or the realization of nonduality with all living beings.

Another Mystical Experience

During midnight hours, experiencing the immense tranquility of the totally secluded atmosphere of Marutwamala, Naanu Swami sometimes engaged in an intimate *upasana* of his favorite deities. Being a disciplined yogi and a perfect siddha, he appeared to possess the ability to visualize the divine presence of various manifestations of the Supreme Being in the form of Siva, Subramanya, Ganesha, Devi, and the mother Goddess.

In the attempt to encapsulate those inexplicable yet profound feelings, he composed many poems of exemplary beauty and rhythm, filled with deep devotion.

One such hymn was titled *Subramanya Keerthanam*, a poem that discloses an intimate dialogue between the seeker and the Lord Subramanya. The poem reveals Naanu Swami's intense desire for a meeting between him and Lord Subramanya. In the song, Naanu Swami lavishly praises the unique magnanimity of his favorite deity.

According to this hymn, it seems that after much pleading, Lord Subramanya finally appeared before Naanu Swami. On a moonlit night, the Lord gave *darsan* to His devotee with all the traditional paraphernalia including the peacock, His celestial vehicle. Enchanted and inspired by the unique experience, Naanu Swami praises his favourite deity.

He also commends the common traits of great souls who do not hesitate to undergo unreasonable hardships for uplifting the downtrodden. To him, Lord Subramanya beautifully exemplified those characteristics of compassion. He considers Lord Subramanya as his role model as he was preparing himself for the service of humanity. Naanu Swami then expresses his determination to immerse into the deep and vast rivers of *niskama-karma* or selfless service as he felt the urgency to involve at that juncture of history.

The following lines of *Subramanya Keerthanam*, (Verse 12) depict the intense feelings of Naanu Swami.

"The Moonlight (of primordial qualms) fully fades away
And the morning sun (of Consciousness) has risen
O' the moon (of ignorance) is nowhere to be seen.
The pursuit of celestial transcendence
To the abyss of bliss,
Let it wait
As I see the world below.

Engrossed in ignorance and misfortune,
And relishing the lure of darkness,
With no light or hope in sight,
Simply perish those destitute masses.

Up, ascend, and rush!
In the river of compassion,

Let me immerse deep,
As time has made the call.

When addressing Lord Subramanya in *Subramanya Keerthanam*, Guru describes Him as the most compassionate and easily pleased among the plethora of deities.

The hymns composed by Naanu Swami at Marutwamala on his favourite deities seem to suggest a mystical ability to invoke gods through *lipasana*. Those hymns not only depict the lively image of the deities but illustrate the intimate dialogue taking place between him and the gods.

Attaining Realization

Naanu Swami stayed in Marutwamala for around four years meditating and conducting *tapas*. He went through various phases of mystic expeditions. At times, for long hours he remained in higher state of contemplation, the process of harnessing internal energy and wisdom.

As Naanu Swami's meditations advanced in time and severity, he entered into prolonged states of ecstasy. All forms and names ceased to exist, and the universe became submerged in the infinite Consciousness. A floodgate of Light was opened, and all notions of duality were burnt down.

According to Naanu Swami, the wide horizons of his mind and intellect were illuminated as his enlightened self was lit simultaneously by the light of a thousand suns. His realization of the unique experience, connecting with the Brahman or Pure Consciousness and the ensuing wisdom is illustrated in his philosophic works such as *Atmopadesha Satakam*, *Arivu*, *Adwaita Deepika*, *Brahmavidya Panchakam*, *Swanubhawa Geeti* and *Darsanamala*. It is assumed that *Kundalinippattu*, another mystique poem written by him, also refers to the various stages of spiritual ecstasy of a yogi. In *Atmavilasam*, another short work in prose form, he explicitly revealed his union with the Supreme Self.

The rays of the pure and uncontaminated love of fraternity that emanated from him were so powerful that even wild animals

came to give him company. Thus, he was experiencing the infinite bliss of union with all beings. His mind was filled with immense joy and compassion. By engaging in a concentrated mental process characterized as *mananam* and *nidhi-thyasanam*, he was able to dig through the mind seeking answers to all mysteries of the universe and problems of the world that have been haunting humans for millennia. In that serene beauty of silence, the countless suns of the Absolute Knowledge illuminated his inner sky of wisdom, clearing all clouds of ignorance.

The answers to all the ages of doubts and queries of contemplative men became clear to Naanu Swami. The mysteries of life and the secrets of the universe were revealed to him as he attained this blissful state. The prophetic revelations revealed in the philosophical poetry composed by him are monumental in nature.

Following the path of the ancient saints, seers and sages before him, Naanu Swami as a foremost siddha, as a perfect Yogi, and as an enlightened soul, experienced the Absolute Reality, Brahman or *Paramatma*.

Discarding worldly affairs, countless men have led their lives since ancient times as ascetics in the remote caves or in thick forests conducting severe penance and yogic practices harnessing the infinite capabilities of the mind. They succeeded in awakening their innate psychic abilities, attaining boundless knowledge beyond the senses as well as superhuman powers beyond the perception of common people. It is still a wonder how the sages discerned the hidden secrets of the universe thousands of years earlier than our modern scientists by employing the power of meditation and mystical vision. During his long stay at Marutwamala, Naanu Swami also went through this spiritual journey in the process of attaining realization.

Mind of the Sages

The elusive and mysterious nature of human mind has prompted serious enquires and study by scientists as well as philosophers throughout history. Indian sages have provided fascinating insights into the mysteries about human consciousness and self-awareness.

The scientific community believes that the mind is part of our brain and consists of a diverse and complex set of emotional experiences in association with the environment. According to modern science, the mind is the seat of cognitive faculties that enables consciousness, perception, thinking, judgment and memory. Scientists generally consider the mind as an extension of the brain but they have not been able to identify a physical location of the mind within the brain. Moreover, they have not been able to provide answers to the many fundamental questions on the mind in unequivocal terms. The modern psychologists in particular and the scientific community in general, study the mind primarily from the perspective of behavior. Even though scientists and psychological researchers have made extensive attempts to define the mind, analyze its workings and have provided fascinating findings on its complexities, still mind remains elusive.

In contrast to the notion of the modern scientists, Indian sages did not consider the mind as an extension of the brain. They believed that the mind was a manifestation of *Prana*, the energy that enlivens every cell within our body. *Prana* is also the same energy inherent in the entire universe in various forms. Our consciousness in the form of ego sets the stage for the formation of our individual mind, and it is through our mind we begin to perceive the universe.

Prana is the fuel that supports this process, and just like the air we breathe in, *prana* energy is infinite and it supports the whole universe. The individual's ego acts as a basic instinct that prompts the rising and fading of the numerous thoughts that clutter the mind. Because of the clutters created in the mind due to our thoughts, over time the mind becomes hard and solid, preventing any penetration of spiritual energy. A yogi through practice controls the *prana* to subdue the diverse thoughts to tame the mind.

Controlling the mind is not an easy task because of the effects of thoughts and emotions. To control the mind, one should first be conscious of the senses. Withdrawal of the senses is the next step to reign over thought. Meditation activates an increasing awareness of one's thoughts and empowers the mind to distance itself from all disturbances.

Once the *yogi* acquires the ability to control the mind and achieve the power of concentration through meditation, the mind becomes

fluid enough for allowing easy transmission of the prana energy. *Yogis* generally term the process as *tapas* or the highest state of meditation.

Tapas is an all-encompassing spiritual exercise for deeper introspective contemplation. It leads to higher states of inner calmness and intuitiveness, and mind would be completely free from all traces of duality. During this process, a yogi would be able to reinforce the thought that the only reality in this universe is nothing other than *Brahman*.

Leaving Marutwamala Mountain

Not surprisingly, the village people came to know that a yogi was conducting penance on top of the hill. They started to come one by one, clearing a narrow path to the top to reach the holy man. They devotionally brought him boiled milk, fruits and vegetables.

Sometimes people were taken aback as they found Swami guarded by two tigers, one on each side. Swami assured the visitors not to fear. He gave a signal to the tigers to slip away. The wild animals obeyed him like domesticated cats.

Soon after, a steady stream of people began to flow to his abode. While some came to see the yogi hoping for a solution to end their problems or to seek blessings, some tread the arduous path through the mountain out of pure devotion. According to witnesses, later reinforced by disciples and early biographers, Swami performed many miracles during this time after listening to the demands of the devotees.

It was obvious he wielded powers over the forces of nature acquired through severe yogic practices. His spiritual prowess and siddhis enabled him to have command over people and their minds. Many incidents were reported regarding the mystical acts of Naanu Swami including the curing of severe mental and bodily diseases.

There were reports that a few barren women conceived after taking a fruit or a little water from Swami. By giving some herbs or sometimes by a simple touch, he miraculously cured many sick people. To those who were suffering from personal problems, Swami gave his advice.

The young yogi was overwhelmed by the outpouring of devotion by such innocent people. His heart was filled with compassion towards them who were lost in the hard realities of life. He felt the time had come for him to end his long stay in the wild terrain of Marutwamala.

After leaving Marutwamala, Swami wandered through the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu and southern Kerala. He befriended many neglected people on the way irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Some requested his presence in their homes. He graciously granted their wishes and blessed their families. Sometimes he stayed with them for two or three days. The radiant appearance and soothing words of the ascetic were more than enough to bring peace and joy.

Many of them led a pitiful life as they lurched between darkness and ignorance. The poor folk were suffering due to reasons beyond their control. The social mistreatment over centuries had effectively caused a deep erosion of confidence and sense of self-worth among the downtrodden. Swami felt that grand efforts had to be made to awaken the society from its deep slumber.

Even though Swami had already acquired yogic powers and experienced spiritual bliss, he was also concerned about the realities of life.

"Those poor and ignorant have to be rescued!"

To Aruvippuram

Before making the deep plunge into his divine mission, Naanu Swami felt for more self-introspection and contemplation. He knew that it was impossible to engage in such a process while living among common folk, listening to their myriad of problems and having continuous social interactions.

What he again sought was an atmosphere free from the noises of the material world. He had some familiarity with the wild forest areas along the banks of the Neyyar river which was home to tigers and leopards. So, the young yogi began to walk towards that direction.

He reached Aruvippuram, a mountainous area near Neyyatinkara, around twelve miles away from Thiruvananthapuram. Aruvippuram

was then a forest area, and wild animals roamed the area. The place was so secluded that no man dared to go there even in daylight.

On the banks of the river, there were huge trees that spread its branches like wide open umbrellas, thus providing shade from sun and rain. Under the trees, there was a cave like structure, naturally formed by the combination of a few huge rocks, one large on top of a few others. It also had a narrow doorway wide enough for an average sized person to squeeze in. The inside was spacious enough for a person to sit for meditation or lie down. The wide roaring river also acted as a natural guard, forbidding the entry of unwanted visitors.

Near the banks, there was a steep hill filled with rocks covered by thick forest. On top of the hill, inside the thick forest, Swami found another cave for doing penance. Sitting cross-legged or in *padmasana*, experiencing the whole universe as nothing other than Brahma or Absolute Consciousness, the yogi meditated there continuously for days and nights.

Occasionally, he took a break, went to the banks, drank some fresh water, took a deep dip and then sat on an elevated rock watching the infinite flow of the mighty river. Sometimes he entered the rock-cave beneath and took a nap there as an innocent child in the lap of Mother Nature.

7

Emergence of a Unique Guru (1886-87)

Towards Guruhood

Even though the word 'Guru' has become a familiar terminology in English lexicon, there is no word in English language that can act as a substitute for the original Sanskrit term. In fact, it is demeaning to characterize and limit the guru as a teacher or even as a spiritual guide or master.

Firstly, real Gurus are rare, occurring only once or twice during a millennium. According to ancient *Upanashadic* wisdom, Guru carries equal or more primacy than Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, the Trinity of the Hindu Pantheon. Guru is equivalent to the *Param-Brahma*, the supreme spiritual force behind the universe.

The literal meaning of guru is the one who dispels the darkness of ignorance from the mind of a disciple. To him, such a service is a selfless and divine duty. As the knower of the Truth, guru is an embodiment of perfection and is beyond all material perceptions of dualities. Nobody can make a person a guru. A real guru emerges naturally from within.

Those fortunate ones who are born with the traits of a guru, it becomes natural for them to tread their destined path, however troublesome, until fulfilling their inborn urge to seek the guruhood. To them, all knowledge is revealed, and there is not a trace of doubt about anything in their mind. A guru may not actively seek any disciple but disciples naturally flow to such enlightened personalities.

Aruvippuram was witnessing the emergence of such a guru. Naanu Swami who came to its wilderness as a sanyasi, siddha and a yogi had already attained enlightenment. He had spent many years in intensive contemplation or tapas in the mountains and wild forests seeking the Truth. Having experienced the state of perfect bliss and union with the Infinite Consciousness or Param-brahma or *param-athma*, he had become that Consciousness itself. To him, the secrets of the universe and the mysteries of life were no longer hidden.

As soon as he attained the transcendental state of enlightenment, he was inspired by the divine forces of Nature to claim the guruhood in him. He did not shy away from acknowledging this rightful designation. Soon he was proclaimed as Guru by the spiritual will of himself.

He could no longer view himself in narrow terms of an individual as he was experiencing the oneness with the universe. All forms of duality ceased to exist before him, and everything was being perceived as the manifestation of Brahma or Infinite Consciousness.

From that unique moment onwards, he would address himself as 'Narayana Guru' and began to refer himself in the plural as "our or us" rather than "me or my". The "I" in him melted away and merged with the infinite Brahma. No one had acknowledged him yet as a guru as he stayed in the wilderness of Aruvippuram, cut off from any human interaction.

Another Sage Poet

"Who am I? Am I just this body? Or, am I something beyond this body? Is there a greater purpose in life? Is death the end of our existence? How did this universe come into being?" Wondering minds have been asking these questions since the human race gained the capacity to think.

Even though critical thinking was developed as a systematic process after Socrates around 2500 years ago, Indian sages engaged themselves in reflective or contemplative introspection even before the time of Socrates. While Greek philosophers primarily concentrated on the social dimensions of human beings, the sages of the *Upanishads* looked at them more profoundly.

The vast volumes of ancient spiritual and philosophic literature symbolize the genius of the sage-poets. They devised the poetic form having specific structures or meters with the goal of passing down their wisdom to the coming generations through oral tradition. According to tradition, a sloka or poetic verse was first uttered by sage Valmiki more than five millenniums ago and for that he was reverently referred as *adi-kavi* or the first poet.

Naa-nrushhi-Kavi has been a traditional dictum in India since ancient times. It means that if you are not a sage, then you cannot be an authentic poet. As philosophical depth and wisdom was the preferred core of traditional poetry, such a profound creation was not expected from ordinary men and women.

One morning sage Valmiki, accompanied by his disciple Bharadvaja was on his way to take bath in the holy river Ganga. On the way, they had to cross a small stream, *Tamasa*. Enchanted by the beauty and rhythm of the flowing waters of the stream, the sage decided to bath in *Tamasa* that day. As he slowly entered the cold water for taking the first dip, his eyes went towards two lovely birds on the branches of a nearby tree on the banks.

The sage was delighted to witness the spontaneous expression of their love and wondered about the divine designs of Nature. His heart was filled with joy and peace. Within a split second, the sage was disturbed by the wailing cries of the innocent birds. Hit by an arrow

of a hunter hiding in the woods, the male bird fell near Valmiki. The severely wounded bird, after a heartbreaking struggle with life that lasted only a few moments, died even as the disturbed sage watched. Having witnessed the anguish of a pitiable creature, Valmiki's mind was roused with righteous anger.

The atmosphere was still filled with the painful and shattering cries of the orphaned lover. Suddenly, a few words in the form of a curse spurted out from the pious sage like the gushing waters of the roaring Ganges. The sage was obviously shocked by the heinous and cowardice crime of the hunter.

Miraculously, that spontaneous curse formed a perfectly structured verse, and later Valmiki was inspired to compose the story of Ram, the legendary hero of the ancient epic *Ramayana*, in the same poetic structure, known as *Anushtup* meter in Sanskrit poetry. That was the story of the first poet of Indian tradition. Ramayana's *Anushtup* was of four verses of eight syllables, and it consists of 24,000 verses. Sorrow and pity were the prime motivators that prompted the blossoming of the creative genius of the first sage poet.

Around five millenniums later, on the banks of a river in southern India, emerged another sage poet. But he was feeling a different kind of pain. He was disturbed by the pain of numerous men and women who were suffering from wounds inflicted by the existing social system.

As Narayana Guru was resting on the banks of the Neyyar river, watching the flow of the sparkling waters and the serene greenery, the divine knowledge he had assimilated began to flow from his mind. Guru allowed the spark of wisdom to be transformed into poetry. The result was the spontaneous outpouring of the masterpiece *Atmopadesha Satakam* or "One Hundred Verses of Self-Instructions".

As a philosophical poem of mystic beauty, literary excellence and captivating rhythm, *Atmopadesha Satakam* has captured the minds of many scholars, thinkers, and spiritualists worldwide.

The First Disciple

It was sometime after Guru's arrival to Aruvippuram that a young man, a native of the area, began spotting a human being in the

secluded mountainous region. The youth was strolling along the river banks, and was surprised to notice a strange man standing across the river on a distant mountain top.

The stranger was seen clad in a pure white cloth and was standing on top of a rock gazing into the distance. The bewildered youth stood rooted for a while and observed the odd individual for a while. As the young man had to leave the place before darkness set in, he left hesitantly.

Even though the young man was familiar with the area, he never had such an experience. He thought many times at night about the person in such a remote and dangerous location. "Who is he?" That question kept on disturbing him. Feeling restless, he wanted to return to the same location the next morning.

Amazingly, the stranger was there at the same spot enjoying the early rays of the morning sun. The young man was perplexed. While standing on the banks of the river, he had seen tigers and leopards freely roaming the wild forest across the wide river. Also, he knew that the forest was infested with poisonous snakes. Not many dared to venture into such a location even during daytime. "Then how can a human being stay alone in such a dangerous environment?" He was convinced that the stranger was not an ordinary person. As an unexplainable pull towards the stranger overwhelmed him, the young man visited the area regularly.

One day, while the young man was standing on the banks, the stranger acknowledged him by waving his hand gently from the mountain peak across the river. The young man gathered the courage to approach the stranger. The Neyyar river is full of huge rocks perched above the water. He passed the river carefully by swimming and using the stones as resting places. After crossing the river, he slowly climbed up the hill and reached the youthful *sanyasin*.

He was frightened to see a tiger very close to the stranger as if it was guarding him. The stranger assured him: "Don't fear. He will not hurt you." The young man was enthralled by the brilliance that emanated from the *sanyasin's* face. The *sanyasin* stated: "I am a bit hungry. Can you get some tapioca (kasava)?" As soon as he heard the calm voice, the young man left the place and returned shortly after with a few fresh tapioca roots. As per instructions, the young

man cooked it on an open fire and handed it over reverently to the sanyasi. As Guru ate the food, the young man delightedly finished the leftovers.

The young man's name was Kochappi Pillai and he belonged to the Nair community, a higher caste according to Kerala's traditional caste hierarchy. Kochappi Pillai was no ordinary young man. It seemed he was destined to be the first person to meet the yogi in that remote and secluded area.

Kochappi's was molded as a pious, humane and devotional person by his mother. As a child, he accompanied his mother, Umminiamma, when she visited temples in the early morning almost every day. She also trained him in reciting the traditional spiritual texts and conducting devotional rituals. After preliminary education, Kochappi stayed with his parents helping them in grazing cattle and doing farming. He also enriched his spiritual and devotional quests by reading and reciting devotional texts and visiting holy places.

Unlike his parents, Kochappi Pillai had no faith in the superstitious rituals associated with caste purity. His parents strictly observed the caste rules and believed that untouchability was mandated by God. Like most others, they also thought that defying the caste rules were an act against God's divine intentions.

Often Kochappi had to endure the wrath of his parents and other elders for not following the caste rules. Based on the understanding of the spiritual texts, Kochappi had the conviction that the discriminatory caste practices had no meaning. He also knew that all living creatures were equal in God's eyes.

Kochappi Pillai visited the sanyasi regularly as a divine affinity sprouted between them. As his family came to know about his close contacts with an Ezhava man, they warned him. But he defied their warnings, and continued his association with the sanyasi. Kochappi's father became furious and threatened him with serious punishment but that didn't deter him either. In those days, a person born as an Ezhava was expected to stay around sixteen feet away from a Nair to avoid ritual pollution.

One day he shared his frustrations with the sanyasi. Guru advised the youth to wait patiently for the appropriate time to join him.

Gradually, a few more people came to know about the presence of the sanyasi and they too became his devotees. They set up an ashram near the banks of the Neyyar river and Guru moved into that humble cottage. Kochappi began to visit his Guru more often and his family and relatives became very irritated with his defiance. Frustrated over the fruitless attempts to change the mind, Kochappi Pillai was expelled from the community after being inflicted with serious physical abuses.

Kochappi Pillai joined Sree Narayana Guru in the new ashram at Aruvippuram and became his first disciple as Sivalinga Swami. He later became a renowned yogi and *siddha* following the footsteps of his Guru.

To the People

Ultimate Sacrifice

The *Yoga Vasishtha*, a principal guide on self-realization, describes the four realms of spiritual journey of a yogi, and they are *brahmavit*, *brahmavidvara*, *brahmavidvariya* and *brahmavid varishta*. The scholars on Vedanta value these four classifications as a hierarchy of the level of perfection seekers attain in their quest of realizing Brahman or the Supreme Truth. Once a yogi attains such a realm, naturally they free themselves fully from the normal activities of material life.

As discussed earlier, Guru possessed an unquenchable calling for realizing Brahman since childhood. For that journey, he sacrificed everything on the path; family life and all the amenities that go with it, close relationships and advancements in material life as a scholar. Guru fortunately shared his spiritual realization

and philosophical revelations in the form of many books such as *Atmopadesha Satakam*, *Darsanamala*, *Adwaita Deepika*, *Brahma-Vidya Panchakam* and many more. *Vedantic* scholars often wonder at the transcendental realms of Guru's sophisticated expressions in those books. The many verses in them are lively testimonies of Guru's dominion as a realized soul.

As per ancient Indian tradition, enlightened souls would seldom return to the midst of people. But Sree Narayana Guru was different from his predecessors in many respects. He was conscious of the unique role he had to fulfill for alleviating the ignorance and ills of society. Guru probably considered his stay in Aruvippuram as a passing stage or a cooling off period before descending to devote himself for the benefit for others.

So, rather than withdrawing from society for immersing in the vast ocean of bliss for the rest of his life, Guru decided to devote his divine energy as a master yogi and siddha for uplifting the society. His heart ached for the millions lost in the darkness of ignorance and immersed in a sea of miseries. He knew that if he abstained from this moral obligation, the sufferings of these unfortunate beings would only get worse.

But his social involvement was not without a cost. The reason behind viewing Guru primarily as a social reformer because of his historic role in profoundly changing the Kerala society is understandable. But to know Guru closely and to grasp his real realm, one must strive to listen to his sagely voice of wisdom by immersing into the depth of his philosophical works. Even though serious attempts to study Guru in this direction have been going on for many decades, the sage-philosopher in Guru is still overshadowed by the tag of social reformer.

Guru's long-time disciple, close companion and renowned poet Kumaran Asan foresaw this dilemma. So, he characterized the decades of social work by the sage as his ultimate sacrifice for the sake of society.

Healing Acts

As news spread that a young yogi was at the shore of Aruvippuram, more people began to visit him. They heard about his miraculous

powers and came with their offerings and pleas. Some had severe health problems, while some faced serious financial crisis. Some were mentally ill and believed they were haunted by ghosts.

As people approached him with their grievances, he compassionately consoled them. His divine presence and pragmatic advises had a soothing effect. By bestowing his blessings, Sree Narayana Guru provided them the courage and confidence to face the myriad of issues in life. In certain cases, he applied his metaphysical powers as a siddha to heal or help the needy. Many seriously ill people were cured simply with a fruit, glass of water or a mere touch. Early biographers, quoting witnesses, have cited amazing accounts in this regard.

After hearing about the young yogi, a group of around twenty-five devotees from Tamil Nadu, the neighbouring state, arrived at Aruvippuram. During that time Aruvippuram was covered by wild forest and leopards and tigers were in plenty. So, people had to come in groups for their safety. Usually they would bring with them sacks of rice, supplies and vegetables for a few weeks. Then they would stay in the ashram doing bhajans and other spiritual activities.

As the group met Guru, they shared their grievances and problems hoping for his divine intervention. The leader of the group had a son. He was also part of the group. Unfortunately, the young man had been suffering from a sore wound inside his mouth for a while. Even though many physicians tried to treat the ulcer, nothing was effective. The son was very thin as he was not able to eat any solid food and was surviving on milk and water. The parents feared that their son was nearing death. As a last attempt, they decided to take him to the divine yogi of Aruvippuram.

After hearing their account, Guru told them he had no magic medicine to cure the disease. But he asked them to prepare a good meal for the group. A fluid spicy dish with many vegetables known as *sambar* was also prepared. When the food was ready, it was first served to Guru on a banana leaf. But Guru wanted everybody to sit together for the meal including the ailing man who was afraid of consuming solid food.

But they obeyed as instructed by Guru. Soon cooked rice was served to everyone on banana leaves, and hot *sambar* was added on

top of the rice. "Let us eat," Guru said. Like under a magic spell, the sick man who had not eaten anything for a long time too began to eat. His parents were surprised to see him consume all that was served to him. From then onwards, the sick man had no problem in eating whatever he liked. After a few days of stay at the ashram, they returned to their homes feeling great devotion towards Guru for the miraculous healing act.

The young man who was saved by Guru later settled in the city of Thiruvananthapuram. One day, Guru along with a few close disciples were his guests. His name was Javalakshnam Mootha Pillai and he was so happy to recall the whole experience to fellow disciples. As he narrated the event, Guru just smiled and kept on enjoying the food served to him with utmost devotion by the man himself.

Aruvippuram Becomes a New Hope

Aruvippuram has been considered a sacred place for generations. It lies beside the shore of the mighty river Neyyar. When Guru arrived there, it was surrounded by a forest full of wild animals. Since ancient times, Aruvippuram was a favorite place of yogis and other spiritual personalities. People believe that many yogis and rishis had conducted long years of meditation in its caves.

Guru's mere presence attracted more and more people from far and near to that remote and serene location. Aruvippuram became a new pilgrimage center for many. Even in Guru's physical absence, visitors would come and feel his divine presence there. They recited holy texts such as *Ramayan* and *Bhagavatham* and conducted bhajans, and they cooked food and ate together. Soon, the sage at Aruvippuram had become an embodiment of hope to the hundreds who came to seek his blessings.

The poor people, branded as untouchables by the upper castes, lacked a sense of community as they didn't have any venue for socialization. Temples were the sole socio-religious meeting place but "untouchables" were not allowed into its premises. If they went to a temple, they had to stay behind a designated area marked as *theenda-paadu*, a good distance away from the temple entrance. According to the prevailing customs, it was believed that an "untouchable" could

not only pollute a person of higher caste but also contaminate the deity in the temple.

The pity was that the upper caste people who imposed the rules and the "untouchables" who were its victims genuinely believed that the superstitious edicts and demeaning customs were the divine will of God. The "untouchables" earnestly believed that because of their birth into a lower caste, they became unfit to be in the good books of God, and they took it as a fact that as their fate was sealed at birth, there was no way out at all. Furthermore, people of both sides of the divide considered it a terrible sin to challenge or ignore these customs. Fearing God's wrath, people followed what had been followed for centuries.

"How can these masses be liberated from the clutches of ignorance? How can these hapless victims of superstition be awakened? How can their dignity be restored? How can these men and women be freed from fear so that they live as free human beings? How can they be led towards a culture of healthy faith so that they also feel the love, compassion and protection of God?"

These questions were reverberating in Guru's mind while the men, women and children from far and near continued their journey through treacherous paths to the secluded shore of Neyyar river with hopes and aspirations.

As a yogi who realized the Supreme Self, Guru could have continued his tapas in the wilderness and experience the ensuing eternal bliss, undisturbed by the mundane affairs of the society. But he was concerned about the agonizing experiences and blatant injustices he witnessed or sometimes endured in the caste-ridden society. There were numerous malicious customs that blinded the masses from seeing the realities in a logical perspective.

Guru knew he needed to employ his spiritual prowess and wisdom to combat thick layers of ignorance. An event that took place one day acted as a catalyst for implementing the plan Guru had in his mind. After settling at Aruvippuram, Guru befriended an ayurvedic physician, Pulivathukkal Velaudhan Vaidyer. He was the head of a prominent family in the neighbourhood. According to local legend, his forefathers were among the earliest settlers in the area. Those valiant men turned a part of the wild forest into a productive farm

by chasing away tigers from the area. In the process, they earned a family name Pulivathukkal "at the door of tigers" in recognition of their courageous lifestyle.

Velaudhan Vaidyer was an ardent worshipper of the local deity and he went to the local temple daily. As Vaidyer was getting ready to leave for the temple one evening, Guru asked him, "Vaidyer, can I accompany you to the temple?" After coming to Aruvippuram, Vaidyer had never seen Guru visiting any temples. Though surprised, Vaidyer happily agreed.

They travelled together and reached some distance away from the temple. Then they had to stop. They were not allowed to proceed further towards the temple entrance as there was a sign marked on a piece of stone that prohibited entry of "untouchables" beyond that point. It was raining badly but they had to stay in the open for a while as Vaidyer wanted to pray during the *deeparadhana* or *aarathi* ritual. Devotees usually throng the temple for the evening *aarathi*, a ceremony of lighted lamps. Having a glimpse of the deity at that moment was considered auspicious.

After some more waiting in the rain, an upper caste temple worker came out and threw a bit of *prasadam* in the direction where Vaidyer was standing. The *prasadam* is a tiny share of the ceremonial offering to the temple deity. Usually, the temple priest serves the *prasadam* to the devotees but people like Vaidyer were denied such a privilege. Very skillfully Vaidyer caught the piece that was thrown in his direction from a distance by holding out a part of his *dhothi*, the wide cloth he was wearing. He had to undergo this insulting and humiliating experience every time he visited a temple.

On their way back home, both were silent for a while. After some time, Guru broke the silence: "What disgraceful treatment! You are a scholar, you have studied Sanskrit and the scriptures, and you belong to a family of brave men. Dear Vaidyer, do you think this is acceptable? Why don't we try to have a temple open to all? A temple free from superstitions! A place where untouchability does not exist! It is possible! Yes, we can do it!"

Vaidyer was elated to hear Guru's words. He quickly consented: "I will do everything in my capacity to support this novel idea. Swami, we only need your directions!"

But Vaidyer was at the same time lost in thoughts. "But how can we have a temple of our own? Who will install the deity? Only ordained Brahmins can do such auspicious acts! O'God! I am lost."

Historic Night of Shiva!

A few days passed. Then Guru announced his plans to install a *Shivalinga*, the symbolic deity of Lord Siva, during the forthcoming *Shivarathri*, the night dedicated to the Lord. The devotees anxiously anticipated the construction of a temple but did not see any preparations. They were confused.

As *Shivarathri* was fast approaching, the restless devotees impatiently enquired upon Guru about the construction of the temple. To their utter surprise, Guru said he wanted to install the deity first and expected the temple to take its place later. Finally, the destined night arrived. Aruvippuram was packed with devotees who aspired to be in the blissful company of Guru and to witness the epochal act he was about to do.

Siva is the primordial god and the divine force in charge of creative destruction in the Hindu Trinity. He is also considered the foremost yogi and a personification of detachment. He is believed to reside in one of the high mountains known as *Kailasm* in the Himalayas.

According to mythology, it was Lord Siva who saved the earth by drinking poison, a byproduct that emerged during the churning of the Ocean of Milk by *Devas* and *Asuras*. The poison was powerful enough to destroy the whole universe and the gods found no place to discard it. It was Shiva who volunteered to do the ultimate sacrifice by drinking the poison out of compassion on all living entities.

But Goddess Parvathy, Shiva's devoted wife, immediately clasped his throat in the attempt to stop the poison from spreading to his body. She then guarded him loyally throughout the night abandoning food, and sleep. To commemorate the agony that Lord Shiva underwent for humanity, and the dedication displayed by Parvathy, devotees observe that special night with fasting and prayers.

Sree Narayana Guru had a special fondness towards Lord Shiva. It was not accidental that he decided to launch his mission on *Shivarathri*.

On the *Shivarathri* of March 12, 1888, people gathered on the banks of the Neyyar in large numbers prepared to spend a sleepless night. The crowd was reciting prayers and devotional songs. But people were perplexed that there was no temple yet for the deity to take its place. Some of them went to Guru and inquired, "Swami, where will the deity be installed?" Guru identified a projected rock as the pedestal for the installation. Devotees hurriedly set up a tent around it. They decorated it with fragrant flowers, coconut palms and mango leaves.

A few curious devotees asked, "Would you also show us the deity?" To their anxious inquiry, Guru's response was a deep silence. Guru then went into long meditation. Time passed and the midnight hour arrived. The air was filled with the chanting of the holy name of Lord Siva. In the midst of this divine atmosphere, Guru abruptly woke up from his meditation.

Without paying any attention to the surroundings, Guru walked towards the river with purposeful steps. He swam towards the center of the river and immersed himself into its depths. They feared for his life as he had submerged into the most dangerous part of the river. As he did not emerge from the water as expected, people became restless. Soon, the atmosphere resonated with the mass chanting of "*Om Nama Shivayal*". As an accomplished yogi, Guru had the ability to suspend body functions including breathing and it enabled him to stay under water for a prolonged time.

Finally, Guru emerged from the water. He was holding a stone close to his chest. Like a gift from Mother Nature, the piece of stone he held was smooth and nicely shaped. It perfectly resembled a Siva Linga, the symbol of Lord Siva. Everyone was amazed and felt blessed as Guru retrieved the rare possession from the depth of Neyyar.

Guru walked towards the tent as the large number of onlookers anxiously watched his every move. He entered the tent and stood near the rock that was supposed to be a pedestal for the installation of the deity. He stayed there for almost three and a half hours in wet clothes with his eyes closed.

Tears rolled down his eyes like a steady stream and water dripped from his soaked attire. Nobody knew for sure what was going on in

Guru's mind. His face glowed with blissful brilliance and his body emanated radiant energy. Hours passed. Slowly he opened his eyes. Holding the stone close to his chest with firm hands and with a heart full of prayers, he bowed towards the rock beneath and placed the idol on the pedestal.

It was reported by earlier biographers that a magnetic beam that came from the remoteness of the higher layers of the sky struck Guru gracefully as he performed the installation. To everybody's surprise, the stone from the river and the rock on the ground melted into one. They remain inseparable even today.

Afterwards the idol was ceremonially washed with tender coconut juice and jasmine water. Then it was garlanded and was offered fragrant flowers. Devotees lined up to have a vision of the deity. Many prayed freely for the first time and sought blessings of the Lord. They were all delighted to have a temple for themselves. To them, it was more than a revolution.

Guru was barely thirty-three years old then.

Idol of Ezhava Shiva

The consecration of Lord Shiva at Aruvippuram by an Ezhava *sanyasi* spread like wild fire. People who heard about it were stunned. Nothing like this had ever happened in their memory.

Until then such consecration was done only by an ordained Brahmin priest. This had been the law of the land for thousands of years and it was the duty of the ruling kings to uphold those rules.

But unfazed by any prohibitions, Guru broke the long-standing traditions that made no sense to him.

Understandably, the traditionalists among the upper castes became furious as they heard about the "provocative act" of an "Ezhava sanyasi". They were shocked by the violation of the age-old caste rules.

"It has to be stopped, and the violator and the accomplices have to pay a heavy price for the offence."

"We can't tolerate this transgression."

"How awful is that he challenged the authority of the priesthood?"

They were quick to voice their outrage.

Even some local Ezhava chieftains were worried. A few had tried earlier to dissuade the *sanyasi* from committing such a "daring" act.

"Why did he encroach on the legitimate right of Brahmin priests?" They asked themselves.

They were almost sure about an immediate and violent backlash.

At least a few among them feared the fury of gods. They predicted divine' wrath in the form of epidemics, violent storms or prolonged droughts. They sincerely believed that the Ezhava sanyasin had violated the divine codes of gods.

"An Ezhava can't do this!" The murmuring went on.

But most devotees and followers who assembled there had firm faith in the young yogi.

"Who else would have the wisdom and courage to do such an act?" The wise among them thought.

Guru was calm and composed. Not a trace of doubt or fear entered his soul. As a yogi who realized the Absolute Truth or *Brahman* through years of intense *tapas*, Guru shone like the morning sun after the passing of a long and dark night. The sagely aura and grace which emanated from him along with the wisdom and self-confidence he exuded were enough to exert a magical effect on others.

Meanwhile, a few agitated Brahmins came forward to question Guru.

"Which *Sastra* approved you to install the deity of Shiva? Don't you know that an Ezhava has no such right?"

Guru coolly looked to the questioner's eyes, smiled and then stated in a soft voice: "The deity I have installed is an Ezhava Shiva".

After a moment of pause, Guru asked, "Are you aware of any prohibition in your *Sastras* against that?"

The aggressors were taken aback by Guru's quick response.

Those stunning words began to reverberate in their mind: "An Ezhava Shiva?"

It was the first time they were hearing about a diety called "Ezhava Shiva." They were confused and didn't know how to respond. We can only imagine the state of their disarrayed mind. They had heard that the *Ezhava sanyasi* had installed the deity of Lord Shiva. They came to see if he had indeed done such a thing, a serious crime had

taken place. Since those Brahmins had never heard or thought about an "Ezhava Shiva," they had no idea what to say or do,

Appearing puzzled, they looked into one another's eyes. After staying there for a few more minutes, they left hurriedly with the senseless consolation that "their Shiva" was safe and secure. But the detractors did not recognize at that time that Guru was rewriting the age-old rules and scripts on spirituality, religion and caste. There was no harshness in Guru's words to those who tried to challenge him. His words were soft and gentle. His only intention was to make a point to those who perceive God and faith in divisive terms.

What took place at Aruvippuram on that night was more than a religious act, and its socio-psychological impact was boundless. A silent, bloodless and the most dramatic social revolution in Kerala was its immediate result. It triggered a rapid transformation of the Kerala society in the following decades. While his words silently mocked the very foundations of the established caste-based rights and privileges, more importantly, it was a loud and effective call for change from within. It was a revolutionary declaration of independence from an outdated system of faith and religion. As a proclamation of emancipation, it empowered the masses to liberate them from their long mental and physical captivity. It was also a confidence building measure for the weak and the meek.

Moreover, it was a call for order and discipline in the lives of the orderless. It was an honest and heartfelt invitation for conscious efforts at self-renewal. And it was aimed at generating enthusiasm, energy and inspiration among the destitute who never knew how to live their lives. Placing faith at the centre, it demanded the millions of marginalized people to feel free for the first time. The shockwaves it generated were felt all over the region, and with its force trembled the decayed castles of caste. A new dawn was rising for the destitute masses.

An Ezhava Shiva?

Sree Narayana Guru was a genius in communication. Moreover, his aptitude for unconventional reasonings to defuse potentially volatile situations was evident since early childhood. His creative

thinking silenced his parents on multiple occasions when he was a child. His seemingly innocent words, "God will be happy if I am happy" was enough to silence his mother as she questioned him about the impropriety of enjoying the sweets offered to the deities. His amusing acts as a child in defiance of the elders to show them the meaninglessness of untouchability demonstrated his exceptional thinking.

It was at the age of six that he stunned the older men with a word or two and forced them to think seriously about profound matters such as life and death. He again silenced the apparently seasoned elders with a simple answer when questioned on why he entered a Dalit home to save their food from getting ruined. He was at his best at the school of Raman Pillai Asan when he asked: "Master! From which direction am I supposed to breath."

The art of thinking outside the box to solve seemingly complicated situations was reflective of his innate ingenuity and wisdom. Guru knew how to disarm a potential antagonist or to diffuse a volatile situation with a simple word or two. But Guru's response to the Brahmins who questioned him on the legitimacy of his right to install a Shiva linga at Arvippuram remains his masterpiece.

Guru's silent action on Night of Shiva raised profound questions. He was forcing a new understanding on the principles of God and wanted to establish that rights over God cannot be defined by caste. How can Lord Shiva, the omnipresent and transcendent force of *Brahman* present in every being, be packaged as an Ezhava Shiva or a Brahmin Shiva? There shall be no Ezhava Shiva as there is no Brahmin Shiva. That was the message Guru wanted to deliver in unequivocal terms to all men and women who have the capacity to think.

After all, who is an Ezhava and who is a Brahmin? What are the benchmarks for determining who is a Brahmin? How can a certain group of men claim monopoly over God? Is God just a commodity to be handled only by certain privileged people? It was not hard for Guru to recognize the hollowness in such arguments.

The most important factor to be noticed is that Guru did not feel that any permission was required from any authority to exercise his rights. His action on that historic night was not only courageous but

potentially dangerous since it was an explicit rejection of established conventions of faith. His deed could have triggered violence and bloodshed. But nothing of that sort took place. That was the power of his word. It didn't matter to him that in those days all matters of religion were regulated by the royal kingdom. He was also not bothered that the caste-observing rulers had the absolute power to determine the fate of violators.

An Ideal Abode of Humanity

A humble temple was soon built there later with mud and brick. On the walls of the temple Guru wrote in bold letters the following majestic words of universal appeal:

*"Jaathi bheatham matha-dwesham
Ethu-millathea sarvarum
Sothara-thwena vaazhunna
Mathruka sthana-maanithe"*

*"Casting out caste misconceptions
Cleansed of defiling notions on religion
Having none of such delusions,
We rejoice as One
Here an ideal dwelling for all"*

What Guru had unveiled was more than a temple. It was his grand vision for a global society. In that ideal land, there exists no ill-will towards anyone. Divisive tendencies arising from caste and religious differences have no role. A boundless flow of genuine concern towards all beings as sons and daughters of the same parents, pervading all artificial boundaries and man-made differences, was the essence of his message. Guru's few words on the walls of the temple vividly exemplify his strivings for a more harmonious and happy world.

The exemplary beauty and timeless relevance of this single verse has captivated the imagination and aspirations of countless minds.

Aruvippuram in Context

The historic installion of Lord Shiva's idol at Aruvippuram by Sree Narayana Guru towards the end of the 19th century deserves special attention for many reasons. To put matters in perspective, let us skim through the political, social and religious background of India and the role of major socio-religious movements during the 19th century.

Even though India was known as a land of a great civilization, it went through centuries of darkness and intellectual stagnation. Due to a host of internal weaknesses and deficiencies, most of its nation states were humiliated on numerous occasions by foreign invasions. As a result, India was politically enslaved for over a thousand years by Asian, Arab and finally European powers. Due to the malicious influences of social evils such as caste system and untouchability, the society was largely fragmented and lacked cohesion. From North to South and from East to West, the majority experienced a life of dual-victimization under the suppressive yoke of political slavery by foreigners and subjugation by internal social system. It was in the early half of the 19th century India began to show some signs of awakening.

The Hindu society during that time was confronting a phase of self-destruction from self-inflicted wounds as well as from external challenges. It was largely immersed in superstitions and people were following senseless rituals and evil practices as divinely mandated. The priestly class virtually dominated the Hindu society and its affairs as they acted as the de facto custodians of the deformed religion.

Since the fundamental values of Hinduism were almost lost in this culture of ignorance, a new generation of educated Indians began to consider everything attached to India as outdated and superstitious. Because of their exposure to Western culture and their proximity to the British rulers, they considered Western way of life and values to be superior. They appeared to be ashamed of their own religion, faith and culture. As a result, the Hinduism practiced by people in general was despised not only by the agents of the British but also by many educated Indians.

The younger generation were caught between the influence of the West and their loyalty towards the Hindu heritage. As this situation was seriously challenging Hinduism as a religion and faith, a few reformers came forward with the mission of resurrecting the religion and culture from its downward slide.

Formally, the Indian reform movement was inaugurated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) with the formation of Brahmo Samaj in 1828. A native of Bengal and a pioneer scholar in modern western education, Roy initiated efforts to reform Hindu religion. His hope was to modernize the religion and culture by incorporating the uncontaminated wisdom of Hinduism with the modern values and principals of the European Enlightenment Movement. Roy was a Brahmin by birth but he took on the orthodox forces within. He vehemently opposed the priestly domination of the Hindu society and tried to eradicate many superstitious beliefs prevalent among the Hindus. Contrary to the traditional Hindu belief system, Brahmo Samaj promoted "One Supreme God" and dismissed all other practices as superstition. Roy was also instrumental in bringing many social reforms within the Indian society. He campaigned against caste discrimination, child-marriage and polygamy, and promoted widow remarriage. He was a big supporter of English education. Because of his efforts, the practice *sati* or widow-burning was banned and was declared a crime in 1829. But within a few decades after his death, Brahmo Samaj lost its appeal and cohesion.

Dayananda Saraswathi (1824-1883) was another prominent reformer who followed a different path in his vigorous fight against social evils. He was a scholar in Vedic traditions and culture and his goal was to reform the society based on the true values of the Vedic system. He was a conservative as well as a modernist at the same time. A nationalist to the core, he worked to free the society from Western culture and values. He preached against outdated rituals rampant among Hindus. He denounced idol worship, caste system and untouchability. He promoted education among both boys and girls, and aspired to integrate the Hindus of various castes and sects into a single community. Dayananda Saraswathi lived as an ascetic. To advance his mission, he founded the Arya Samaj in 1875. To a certain extent, the attempts of Arya Samaj were effective in protecting the

Vedic traditions from the onslaught of Western influences, and became an influential force in northern regions of India.

The Prarthana Samaj of Maharashtra originated in 1867 along the lines of Brahmo Samaj. The support and involvement of national leaders like Mahadev Govind Ranade helped it to become influential. Prarthana Samaj was basically a devotional organization even though it also worked towards bringing certain social and religious reforms within Hinduism.

The role of these movements in developing a fundamental admiration towards the cultural and religious values of India among the educated Indians was significant. Also, these movements were largely responsible for shaping up the Indian intelligentsia as well as Indian nationalism. However, these movements exhibited legitimate differences in their approach to religious reform and social changes as they tried to refine the Indian society in tune with the modern times.

Without a doubt, the role played by those organizations in awaking the stagnant Indian society from its deep slumber was historic. However, their scope was limited as far as the issues of downtrodden communities were concerned. Their reach was confined primarily within the higher castes. The leaderships of these movements as well as the majority of its followers were generally upper caste Hindus. The lives of the vast majority of people, marginalized for centuries, continued to remain relatively unaffected despite the influence of these organizations in various regions of India.

It was under these circumstances that another major social reform movement sprouted in Maharashtra with a distinct set of goals. This new organization was in stark contrast to the earlier movements in many ways. This was envisioned by a lower caste leader. Its exclusive goal was to improve the plight of the traditionally marginalized communities. The Satyashodak Samaj was founded by Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule in 1873. It began to forcefully demand eradication of untouchability and other forms of social discrimination and injustices based on caste.

Mahatma Phule was a social revolutionary in action. He unleashed a frontal attack on the caste system by despising the upper castes and their flaws. He urged his followers to rally against all means of subjugation used by caste-Brahmins for generations. He revolted

against the foundations of Hindu religion and condemned the Vedas, the most holy scripture of the Hindus. He strongly criticized the traditional attitudes of Brahminical-Hinduism towards lower castes. As a humanist and an admirer of Thomas Paine, the American writer and social activist, Phule strongly argued for social justice and equality of castes. On the other hand, caste-Brahmins opposed him for violating the traditional order. It was Mahatma Phule who coined the term "Dalit" to identify the entire marginalized people in India.

However genuine and effective in influencing various segments of the Indian society, these movements had their own inherent deficiencies vis-A-vis their scope and objectives. As a result, none of them enjoyed universal acceptability. While championing specific causes, they effectively alienated other groups who failed to share their views. So, rather than unifying the people for a just cause, these movements generated a level of suspicion or uneasiness towards them which caused further divisions in the society.

A Paradigm Shift

In comparison to every other major movement before and after Aruvippuram with similar social, religious or philosophical motives, Sree Narayana Guru's movement was different in many ways. As a healer and a reformer, Guru embraced all people in good faith and never faulted anyone or any group of people for society's ills. He identified the ignorance embedded in them as the villain. Due to this holistic vision, inclusive approach and genuine openness, he achieved his objectives without offending any caste, community, religion or culture. The beauty of his movement was that it was against none and was for all.

On the social front, the Aruvippuram initiative was the first effective wake-up call in the history of the Indian sub-continent since the time of Buddha to generate an inclusive mass movement against caste. Moreover, it effectively nullified the underlying fallacies concerning the divinity of caste that was the bedrock of the Indian caste system for centuries. Guru was able to awake and energize the downtrodden across the region by implanting in them a striving for self-improvement. Never before in India's recent history,

was such an effective movement of traditionally marginalized people forged together to fundamentally change the society. A dramatic yet peaceful transformation of the whole society within a short span of time was its result.

The earlier religious reform movements were mostly led by leaders who belonged to upper castes. At least on the peripheral level, being members of the privileged castes, their involvement in reforming the religion resulted from a natural obligation to save Hinduism from eventual ruin. As upper castes and traditional beneficiaries of the religion, the stakes involved in saving the religion were far higher for them in comparison to a person born into an "untouchable" caste. To the sensible among the untouchable communities, saving Hinduism, with its myriad superstitious customs and inhuman practices, was not a cause worth undertaking.

As Guru stepped into the scene, many members of the "untouchable" communities were on the verge of deserting Hinduism for other religions. So, one logical choice before a responsible religious reformer of that time was to stay within the Hindu fold and then confront the problems head on to force changes from within. That was a tough call to take. The other easy option was to support the escape of the marginalized people in the form of mass conversion to another religion. Naturally, some leaders belonging to lower castes strongly felt that being victims of insult, open discrimination and physical abuses, deserting Hinduism was the fitting response.

But Guru was not a usual reformer. Though he hailed from a traditionally marginalized community of "untouchables", he was a scholar in ancient scriptures and an authority on *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Agamas* and other *Shastras*. As a pragmatic visionary who drew from India's ancient wisdom, Guru strived to transform that knowledge to meet the religious, social, and spiritual requirements of the present.

He was conscious of the profound merits that overly outweigh the weaknesses and apparent faults of the religion. He was convinced that a mass exodus from Hinduism would serve no purpose. The temple at Aruvippuram was a first step in his new struggle to clean up the system from within. He accepted the major tenets, defining values and diverse characteristics of Hinduism to uplift the people who happened to be its adherents. He promoted an advanced spiritual

culture by elevating common people to a new realm of faith. He consecrated temple after temple across the length and breadth of Kerala to satisfy the religious as well as the social needs of the people. For the community of devotees, he wrote hymns of exemplary beauty in praise of each deity consecrated by him. In reality, the approach taken by Guru effectively rescued not only the "untouchable" communities but also the Hindu religion from a possible extinction in Kerala.

At a time when the society was torn apart by the evil effects of the caste system, Guru was an avatar of a new awakening. He took the mission to guide the society through a peaceful and progressive transition while attempting to eradicate widespread social inequalities, blatant injustices and ingrained prejudices. Even though Guru effectively became one of the most efficient revolutionaries the world has seen, to all constituents of the society, he was a prophet of peace. Like a magician, he commanded unparalleled sway among all sections. People from all walks of life looked up to him with reverence for guidance and consolation. Unlike other social and religious revolutionaries, he lived among the people as a unifying force of compassion and wisdom. Attracted by his spiritual grace and sagely wisdom, a few men who were born upper castes joined his ascetic order and aided him wholeheartedly in the struggle against the institution of caste.

The goal of the movement led by Guru was to awaken the entire society. Its benefit was not targeted for any particular community. It was a holistic, systematic and peaceful revolution to improve the social, religious and spiritual system. The declaration of humanism in the form of a small poem enshrined on the walls of the Aruvippuram temple further exemplifies his universal vision. He was revered and accepted by all people as a sage of enormous goodwill. There has never been even a single murmur against him though he was the most active force in Kerala for four decades. No leader in India, who worked among the neglected communities for improving social status and justice received similar respect and acceptance. Guru's dramatic appearance in the public sphere of Kerala with his universal approach to religion and social justice was an effective paradigm shift in the socio-religious context of India.

The Temple Movement (1888-1916)

Temple Civic Forums

When Sree Narayana Guru formally began his mission of social and spiritual upliftment with the installation of the deity of Lord Siva in Aruvippuram in 1888, the society of Kerala was too fragmented and disunited due to a range of reasons. As we read in the previous chapters, it was a time when superstitious socio-religious practices such as untouchability and unapproachability were vehemently enforced as the rule of life. As a result, contacts across caste groups were very limited as the multitude of castes and subgroups led a compartmentalized way of life. Generally, individuals and families conducted their lives as self-enclosed units minding their own petty affairs. The basic characteristic of the system effectively

hindered the sprouting of any notion of unity or cooperation. Prior to the active involvement of Guru, people of Kerala lacked any serious exposure to the ideas of organization or its relevance in enhancing the common good.

The installation of the deity of Lord Siva in Aruvippuram in such a scenario was a genuine move by Guru to empower the distressed masses from centuries of despair. Gradually, the temple became famous and people far and near began to visit it regularly. Guru used it as an opportunity to guide and console the devotees who came to pay obeisance to him and to pray at the temple. The Aruvippuram temple generated a sense of self-respect among the lower caste people across the region. To manage the shrine, Guru took the lead to form a civic forum consisting of influential individuals from the surrounding community. Thus, the Aruvippuram Vavoottu Yogam, the mother of all later socio-cultural organizations in Kerala, became active in 1893.

Beyond taking care of the temple, the Vavoottu Yogam also offered the downtrodden community a platform for the first time in Kerala's history to share their aspirations and grievances. Often the forum was also used to share and discuss contemporary issues of social relevance. Its original goals also included a wide range of services for the spiritual as well as material progress of the community. Guru wanted the forum to promote education, agriculture, trade, technical knowledge and cooperative entrepreneurship using the temple as their base.

Soon other people began to seek Guru's interventions as they also wanted to have temples in their villages. A number of temples were consecrated in the next few years. Along with those temples, Guru initiated the formation of *desha-sabhas* or civic forums which not only managed the temple affairs but also looked into the issues of the communities they represented. In the process, Guru became moderately well known in the region. His growing number of admirers and followers began to take his words as divine utterances and they looked up to him for guidance in matters of life. So, even before the S.N.D.P Yogam was officially formed, Guru had been recognized as the *de facto* leader of the Ezhava community as their sole saviour and spiritual guide. In fact, a proposal for those civic forums to be

collectively considered as the front-runner of the S.N.D.P Yogam came up a decade later.

Chain of Temples in southern Kerala

Soon the fame of the Aruvippuram temple and the name of the divine yogi spread to neighbouring regions of southern India. Demand for new temples as well as for the revamping of many existing shrines came up one after another. People began to sense a new possibility of hope. For the next four decades, Guru spent considerable time establishing temples, ashrams and other institutions across southern India. As Guru's spiritual and social revival went on successfully, it enabled the lifting of community after community from centuries of stagnation. Sree Narayana Guru was personally involved in establishing around one hundred such institutions for the benefit of the downtrodden communities.

The problem was that the majority of people stigmatized as "untouchables" were leading an ignorant life without any sensible idea of God or faith. At a time when a positive faith culture was denied, they had resorted to various modes of negative worship harmful to their own well being. In the hope of pleasing the deities, the poor devotees had to waste their hard-earned resources on absurd rituals. Most of the time, those rituals consisted of animal sacrifice and use of alcohol accompanied by other wasteful practices.

Guru's initial goal was to raise the standard of faith among the ignorant masses. So, as part of revamping the faith culture, Guru campaigned to end the self-demeaning and negative faith practices. He then attempted to replace it with a refined faith without deviating from the true spiritual foundations of the land.

The first temple after Aruvippuram was consecrated in 1889 at Mannamthala near Thiruvananthapuram. Guru installed Devi as the presiding deity. There existed an old shrine dedicated to a ferocious goddess at the site and animal sacrifices were performed there to please the deity. By replacing the old deity with the idol of *Devi* or mother goddess, Guru's main intent was to refine the faith culture of the surrounding community. Guru then compiled *Mannamthala Devi-Stavam*, a beautiful hymn in praise of the deity for recitation

by worshippers. It contains nine stanzas. Like all other hymns written by Guru, this one also is filled with beautiful imagery and metaphors, and it intends to elevate the devotee towards a higher state of spiritual awareness. The hymn invokes Lord Shiva and Devi as depictions of *Brahman* or the Supreme Consciousness, and an in-depth understanding of the hymn may lead the devotee to realize the truth of *Brahman* through the divine life forces personified in the form of Shiva and Devi.

Guru installed the next temple in Kulathoor, a village in Thiruvananthapuram district. There existed an old shrine with an idol of Kali. As part of the ritual to please the goddess in the ferocious form, devotees used to offer chickens to be slaughtered at the altar. Other forms of offensive offerings were also made. Devotees had both fear and faith in Kali. Guru, as part of his travels throughout the region, had become familiar with this shrine and the people in its neighborhood. He had a special affinity towards the place. The villagers were kind and loving, and Guru admired their hospitality and sincerity. Many in the area became his devotees.

The ritual practices conducted in the shrine were diametrically opposite to the refined culture of faith Guru was trying to implement. So, he decided to replace the old deity to force a change in the worship practices and faith culture, and one day announced his plan. Guru asked the temple priests to remove the idol to make way for Lord Shiva. At first, they were horrified by the proposal. Even though they were too scared to remove the idol, upon Guru's insistence they tried hard to un-pluck it from the pedestal but failed. As the news spread, people from neighboring areas arrived in good numbers.

Everybody anxiously awaited Guru's next move. He silently entered the shrine, easily removed the deity, and instructed the priests to place it in a corner. Afterwards, Guru ritually installed an idol of Lord Shiva on the old pedestal. From that day on, the temple came to be known as Kolathukara Siva Temple. Surprisingly, there were no murmurs against Guru's act. What Guru did that day was beyond imagination in those days. Even though drastic and swift, the act was done without causing any hurt to the sentiments of the worshipping community. The event took place on March 27, 1893.

After the installation of Lord Siva in Kolathukara, Guru composed a meaningful hymn, "*Kolatiresa Stavam*", in praise of the new deity. It had become a usual practice that after consecrating a deity, Guru usually composed devotional hymns for worship. Just like Guru's other hymns, "*Kolatiresa Stavam*" is also replete with rhythm, music, devotional spirit and philosophical wisdom. The hymn contains ten stanzas and the prayer seeks protection, wisdom, happiness, virtue, humility and compassion from the Lord. The prayer also requests Lord's blessings for the control over our physical, mental and intellectual faculties so that they don't deviate from righteousness.

Another new temple was established in 1899 by Guru in Muttakkat Kunnumpara, which is very close to Kovalam, now a favorite tourist destination. The temple at Kunnumpara is on the top of a hill, and the beautiful scenery of the surrounding areas was clearly visible from there. The cool sea breeze from the Arabian Sea is a pleasant blessing during summer days. The view of the vast sea from the temple courtyard is enchanting. Even though the location is rocky and water is scarce, near the temple exists a natural fountain formed by a gap between two giant rocks that brings pure water in plenty all the time.

Almost all the temples established by Guru have some unique characteristics. They usually reflect Nature's beauty and God's special blessings. At Kunnumpara, Guru installed his favorite god Lord Subramanya. Subramanya is the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathi. Through his many hymns, Guru expresses a special affinity towards Lord Subramanya. Guru spent considerable time during the early days of his ministry at this temple

Temple to Rescue a Village

There was a village of poor people named Kottar near Nagercoil in Tamil Nadu. The villagers had remained perpetually haunted by disease and poverty. They consulted astrologers as well as *Voodoo* priests in a frantic attempt to find solutions to their problems. Unfortunately, they were unable to escape their misfortune. An elderly person among them had an idea. He told them: "Let us go to

Swami at Aruvippuram. He will save us!" Many people in Nagercoil area were familiar with Sree Narayana Guru as he was a frequent visitor to those areas. They used to address him as Swami. Many people had their own stories about the miraculous help rendered by Swami in those days.

Soon a group of elders left Kottar to see Guru. Even though he was traveling most of the time, he was fortunately at Aruvippuram when these people reached there. After prostrating before Guru, they explained their pathetic plight. Guru said, "Don't worry! I will come there tomorrow. You can go home peacefully." They returned home with a sigh of relief.

Guru reached Kottar the next morning and stayed near the site of a prominent shrine. People felt a sense of relief in Guru's presence. Even though the inhabitants of that village remained poor, superstitious and ignorant, there was no shortage in the conduct of costly rituals, including regular sacrifice of small animals and chickens. The idols were washed with the warm blood of the murdered creatures. They knew no prayers and had no idea of the real meaning of spirituality. They had been performing these rituals for fear of the evil spirits they happened to worship.

Guru instructed them to stop offering animal flesh, blood, fish and egg to please the deity. He found out that there were more than forty such shrines in the area. The ignorant people were wasting a lot of money on these meaningless rituals. Guru briefly explained what was wrong with their worship of evil spirits. It was the first time they were hearing about God and spirituality. As a solution to their plight, Guru instructed them to immediately dismantle all existing shrines in the area.

Even though they had been devotionally worshipping the multitude of deities for generations, there was not a murmur against the words of Guru. They had utmost faith in his divinity. Guru continued, "Let us build one new shrine replacing all the dismantled ones. I shall install an idol of *Ganapathi*, who is the son of Lord Shiva, in the new shrine. He will bring you prosperity and happiness. There shall be no more evil worship."

Guru asked them to bring a few sacks. He ordered them to pluck out each of the existing, deities and place them in the sacks. Even

though they wanted to obey Guru's command, they were afraid of removing the idols they had been worshipping. Guru understood their predicament and instructed one of his trusted lieutenants to do the act. Soon those deities were taken out and stacked. A huge crowd watched the men in action. Forty-two such shrines were cleared.

Guru then told them: "Let us proceed to the sea." Once they reached the shore, one by one the deities were thrown into the sea. The waters of the Arabian Sea consumed them. Guru then selected a person, Perumal Panicker, a reputed philanthropist in Kottar, to take the leadership to build the new temple. Not many in the crowd knew that the site for the new temple was a sacred place as it was the final resting place of a sage who lived there centuries ago.

All the villagers worked together like a team. Soon a magnificent temple for Lord *Ganapati* was built in the heart of Kottar. Guru along with a group of disciples consecrated it on April 13, 1908. A huge statue of *Ganapati* made in stone was carried to the site by four men. Guru single-handedly lifted it and placed it on the pedestal in the sanctum sanctorum. A massive crowd was there to witness the auspicious event. Guru named the facility "*Pillayar Kovil*" *Pillayar* is the Tamil name for *Ganapati*. Guru then composed "*Vinayaka-ashtakam*", a beautiful hymn in praise of Lord *Ganapati* replete with rhythm, music and meaning. The devotees began to chant it as part of worship.

Progress and prosperity returned to that close knitted community soon. People were more than happy to share their excess wealth towards the welfare of the community. They built educational facilities as well as old-age homes as part of the temple complex. Today, *Pillayar Kovil* in Kottar stands as a proud and ideal monument to Guru's vision of an ideal worship centre.

Guru in Malabar Region

The temple movement of Sree Narayana Guru that was spread across the three regions of Kerala (Travancore, Cochin and Malabar) was marked by certain unique features. As victims of centuries of maltreatment and ignorance, Ezhavas and other lower castes had been

suffering from spiritual and cultural degradation. Many indulged in primitive and crude practices such as black magic and animal sacrifice to satisfy their sense of faith. The educated among them felt deep sympathy towards their brethren but felt helpless.

Since lower castes were forbidden from the temple premises of upper castes, Churayi Kanaran, a successful Ezhava official in the British government, attempted to establish a temple for his community in Malabar region in 1848. But no Brahmin priest was willing to sanctify a temple for the Ezhavas except a greedy one who demanded an unreasonable sum to provide such his service.

The plan was abandoned midway as it was found to be unaffordable. The plan was revived after a long break of sixty years by a local Ezhava philanthropist, Kaniyil Kunjikannan. He travelled a long distance enduring many difficulties to reach Sivagiri and met Guru. He apprised the yogi about the degrading lives of his fellow Ezhavas in north Kerala. He referred to Guru's revival of the community through the temple movement in southern Kerala and urged him to do the same in north Kerala. Guru agreed to send Kumaran Asan, his trusted lieutenant, to the region to lay the groundwork for the temple mission.

In the first meeting of the Ezhava chieftains in the area in July 1905, Kumaran Asan eloquently spoke about the reforms initiated by Guru in Travancore region and its positive impact in the lives of the people. By then Guru had consecrated many temples across southern Kerala. As a result, the community was on a path of awakening after a long slumber. Asan proposed a plan of action to follow on the proposed temple project. All attendees enthusiastically approved it and they agreed to donate the necessary funds.

Guru traveled to Thalasserry in March 1906 to officially inaugurate the construction of the temple. A large crowd of devotees reached the site to seek his blessings and to hear his words. There were numerous factions among the community under the leadership of powerful local stalwarts. Guru's presence had a soothing effect on them. Guru advised them to put an end to their feud and to act as a uniting force for their own betterment.

Most Ezhavas in the region were poor and it was hard for them to donate the huge funds necessary for the proposed temple. Even

though the wealthy ones made pledges, they were reluctant to part with their money. As the frustrated organizers met Guru and told him about the slow pace of fund collection, Guru told them, "The temple will build itself". Guru was assuring them of the self-generating power of noble and well-intended goals such as building a temple. As Guru predicted, soon the funds began to pour in and the construction progressed under the leadership of Kottiyathu Ravunny Vakeel, an Ezhava leader. Finally, a temple for Lord Shiva was completed. Guru consecrated it on February 13, 1908. There was an over flowing crowd to witness the historic moment. As the ceremony was being conducted by Guru, the whole crowd devotionally chanted the *pranava mantra* 'OM'.

Guru named the shrine Jagannatha temple to model it on the famed Puri Jagannatha temple in eastern India. The Puri temple was exceptionally known for its openness to all regardless of caste. It was Guru's intention to follow the traditions of the Puri temple. Unfortunately, some Ezhava chieftains were not comfortable with the idea of admitting Dalits to their temple and they hesitantly made their views known. It was not Guru's style to force anything on anybody. Guru wanted the transformation to take place peacefully and voluntarily.

During the course of time, agreements between those who supported and opposed the entry of Dalits intensified. Guru returned to Thalassery to intervene and gave a rousing talk on the immorality and hypocrisy of the position taken by a few. As a compromise, the orthodoxy proposed: "Let us wait for a *varsham*" In Malayalam *varsham* means "year" but it is also a synonym for rain. What the orthodoxy really meant was that they needed a year to make up their mind. As they were talking, the area was struck by a sudden, rainstorm. The rain stopped after some time. Guru gently reminded those who opposed the entry of Dalits: 'A *varsha* is over. Let us allow all into our temple.' Laughter erupted in acknowledgement of Guru's sense of wit and wisdom, and everyone nodded in agreement.

As the news spread, there was a continuous flow of Dalits to the temple from neighboring areas. They prostrated before Guru in gratitude. Guru was in tears as he witnessed their innocent faith

and devotion. Murkoth Kumaran, an earlier biographer of Guru who witnessed this, stunned the gathering by falling at the feet of Guru to express his immense satisfaction as the temple doors were finally open to all. The establishment of a new temple was a big boost to the morale of the lower castes, especially to Ezhavas in the Malabar region.

A metal statue of Guru was installed in the temple premises at the insistence of Guru's devotees led by Murkoth Kumaran. Thavarali, an Italian sculptor, was chosen to make the statue. It was formally installed on March 13, 1927. In an interesting twist of fate, Guru's disciple Swami Bodhananda was chosen to unveil the statue.

Swami Bodhananda first met Guru around two decades earlier when Guru arrived there to install the deity of Lord Jagannatha in the newly built temple. Young Bodhananda, being a rational revolutionary at that time, was opposed to deity worship and had a lengthy argument with Guru on that occasion. But Guru's soothing responses to his agitated questions were more than enough to cool off the young man's heated mind. He prostrated before Guru and yearned to be a disciple. Guru agreed and he became one of the leading figures among Guru's small circle of close disciples. Swami Bodhananda made significant contributions to the propagation of the Sree Narayana wave in Kerala. Guru entrusted him with many tasks and anointed him as his successor.

A gathering of around five thousand men, women, and children from all walks of life gathered to witness the installation ceremony. There were many Brahmins along with non-Brahmins and Dalits without having any feelings of caste bitterness. Murkoth Kumaran told the crowd that the statue was not of a war hero, king, scientist or an artist but a real yogi who had earned the reverence of millions with his spiritual prowess. Guru was characterized as the perfect *Jnana Yogi* and *Karma Yogi*. Many dignitaries including judges, social and political leaders such as Mancheri Rama Iyer, V. Karunakaran Nair and Rama Rao from across the caste-ladder spoke at the grand function.

While the preparations in Thalassery temple for the statue installation were on, Guru was in Sri Lanka. The metal statue arrived

by ship via Colombo while Guru happened to be in the vicinity. As he was told about the proposed installation, Guru commented humorously, "Good, it will live without food!"

Temples across the Region

After Sree Narayana Guru lit the lamp of a new spiritual revolution in 1888, people in various regions of southern India, especially those from lower castes, were rescued from evil forms of worship. They had been practicing diverse forms of degraded rituals with utmost devotion. It was not easy to deter them from the shrines of negative spirits. Many of them were lost in darkness for generations. Nobody had the courage to change them from their self-destructive modes of spiritual practices until Guru arrived on the scene.

The uniform attributes of the deities installed by Guru carried certain features. By consecrating *sattvic* deities of the Hindu pantheon like Shiva, Subramanya, Vinayaka and Mother goddess, Guru had noticeably shown his preferences for the Saiva tradition. In fact, such a free exercise of faith was a dramatic and revolutionary leap from the past. Until then the "untouchable" communities had been barred from worshipping such conventional deities.

For the next four decades, Guru pursued his temple campaign across Kerala and in neighbouring regions, thus smashing long held worship patterns. He led a socio-religious and spiritual revolution by reclaiming the right to positive or *sattvic* worship. That was the beginning of a new temple culture in southern India. Thus many old and dilapidated shrines were replaced with new physical structures and worship culture. A spirit of enthusiasm and spirit of organization was generated across the communities.

Guru genuinely valued the role of faith in the progressive journey of people. From early childhood, he was a symbol of faith that found its fruition in the hills of Marutwamala and in the caves of Aruvippuram. Faith gives people solace when everything else fails. Faith in a higher being offers positive assurances when grappled with physical, mental and spiritual challenges. A positive faith may lead to a positive mental attitude such as love, courage, optimism, strength, hope, inspiration and compassion. Proper faith also has therapeutic

effect in cleansing the mind from low level emotions such as anger, fear, envy and hatred.

Redefining Role of Temples

Sree Narayana Guru's vision of the temple for the new era was different in many ways from the traditional temples. Even though Guru was active in erecting many temples, he dissuaded his followers from spending large amount of money for building big temples. Without undermining the role of temples as centers of faith, Guru wanted the shrines to promote the holistic development of the community.

The uprooting of social ills by using the temple as a platform was a major goal that Guru envisioned. To him, the temple was more than a place of worship. He believed that temples should be a citadel of service to the community that included the dissemination of knowledge. Guru also hoped to cultivate a culture of charity among the worshipping community using temple as a medium. While acknowledging the significance and value of a temple as a house of worship and as a center of faith, Guru was more appreciative of its social dimensions to unite, serve and educate people.

. As Guru knew that providing education was the key to rescue people from poverty, ignorance and superstitions, almost all of Guru's actions were directed at achieving that goal. So, Guru conceived temples as ideal institutions for educating and developing people. He advised people to utilize the temple facilities also as training centers for skill development, trade and industry.

Guru wanted temples to be built with wide meeting halls even though such a style was unusual in those days for a temple. His concept on the structure of a temple was somewhat closer to the Christian church. He preferred such facilities over the old model to allow people to gather together for exchanging ideas in a positive atmosphere. Gardens and libraries were two other vital components of the temple concept envisioned by Guru.

Above all, Guru wanted to return the income accumulated in the temple back to the community in the form of useful services. Guru was against wasting resources on lavish festivals. Citing multiple reasons, Guru also advised strongly against display of fireworks and

elephant processions. As Guru had the courage and ingenuity to state such revolutionary ideas more than a century ago, it energized a new generation of rational thinkers and prompted them to force changes in the outdated attitudes and mindsets of the traditional society.

As Guru continued with his mission of establishing temples, a few among the new generation thought that he was out of track with the changing times. When a journalist invited Guru's opinion on the utility of temples, he gave the young man a lengthy lecture on their positive benefits. The first reason cited by Guru was that temples promoted a culture of personal hygiene among devotees. Taking a bath before entering the temple has always been a commonly accepted practice. "People would also try to clean up their mind from bad thoughts and emotions when they visit temples. Clean body and a clean mind along with the fresh air in the open is better for a person's health. Some devotees also fast which is not only good for their health but will lead to better discipline. Above all, the role of faith in one's life is very important. In some cases, devotees may realize their desires and wishes with their faith. It all depends on the power of one's faith," Guru stated.

After hearing Guru, the journalist commented: "Now-a-days people don't believe in idol worship."

Guru said in response: "Devotees go to temple thinking about God and not the idol. Unless people like you remind them of the idol, their mind will not be diverted. People know that God is not the idol but they can see God in the idol. Let us turn temples as ideal abodes for cultivating good habits and character. A temple with a beautiful garden, tall trees and open spaces to enjoy the fresh air! A temple having a library and a large hall for discussions! Let there be scholarly discourses on various religious and philosophical topics to enliven the spirits of everyone! In fret, temple can be turned into a harvest field of good minds and noble thoughts. Yes, temples are needed indeed but they have to meet the requirements of the people."

Guru delivered a specific message in 1917 reiterating his preference for the need to educate people by concentrating efforts on building more schools. He began advising his followers to slow down on the temple construction. As Guru considered schools as the new temples

to enlighten people, he discouraged the use of resources for building more temples. He cited an array of reasons for his change in strategy.

Contrary to his expectations, Guru found that people had failed to follow his concept of an enlightened temple complex. Instead of turning temples into a meeting place of all people to cultivate good habits and thoughts, Guru was disappointed by the petty behaviour, clash of egos and sectarian interests of the so-called devotees in many of the new temples. "Without proper education and knowledge, people will remain immature and ignorant beings. Until they develop themselves, they will remain incapable of grasping the essence of noble ideals," Guru felt.

Forming S.N.D.P. Yogam (1893-1903)

Kumaran Asan Becomes Disciple

In the West as well as in the East, there have been many examples of ideal relationships between great masters and their disciples.

Socrates had Plato as his foremost disciple and Plato had Aristotle. According to the Bible, Jesus Christ had twelve disciples who spread his gospel around the world. In India, the 8th century ascetic philosopher Sri Sankaracharya had a great disciple. Much later, it was Swami Vivekananda who carried out the mission of his guru Ramakrishna. India's philosophical tradition has been perpetuated through master-disciple links. Great masters selflessly imparted knowledge, philosophy, wisdom through their devoted disciples who took their masters to be nothing but the personification of God.

The affinity between Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan was a unique relationship. Guru adopted the young Kumaran into his fold while the teenager was going through a crisis. Kumaran was clueless about his future when Guru met him. It was the genius of the Guru who identified the budding poet in young Kumaran who later became the most celebrated poet in Malayalam literature. Kumaran Asan inaugurated the renaissance in Malayalam literature. Guru's influence, guidance and support were vital in the development of Kumaran Asan as a revolutionary poet, successful social reformer, effective organizer, philosopher and more. In return, Kumaran Asan served Guru as his most loyal lieutenant, carrying out his vision, philosophy and message to the people through his literature and social involvement.

It was sometime after the Aruvippuram installation, most probably in 1891, that Guru got acquainted with the young Kumaran. Kumaran was about eighteen years old then. His father Narayanan Perunkudy was a devotee of Guru. It was from him that Kumaran first heard about the greatness of Guru. Guru, an ardent traveler, used to visit temples in the neighborhoods of Kaikkara, Kumaran's native village.

From an early age, Kumaran was inclined towards spirituality and devotional practices. He wrote many hymns as well as love poems. Like many poets of the era, some of Kumaran's earlier poems were embedded in erotic love. The goal of writing poetry in those days was mainly to show off one's literary skills and knowledge.

After completing education, Kumaran became a teacher in a nearby school where he had been a student. As he was below the required age to become a teacher, Kumaran had to leave his job. Afterwards, he was engaged in a few odd jobs such as maintaining accounts in a store to support his large family. But the young genius was not satisfied with his mundane life. He used every opportunity to enhance his knowledge.

One day, Kumaran decided to quit his job at the store as he didn't have any passion for it. It was around that time Guru visited the home of Kumaran and happened to meet him. Kumaran was sick and bedridden. Guru prescribed certain ayurvedic medicines for Kumaran's quick recovery. Guru also recognized the sleeping genius

in Kumaran and asked whether he would want to join him. Kumaran immediately consented. Guru then turned to Kumaran's parents for their permission. Even though it was hard for them to give away their promising son to the service of Guru, they kept their silence and didn't say anything against Guru's wish.

After recovering, Kumaran met Guru a few times. Their *Guru-shishya* relationship began to evolve. He became a student of Manambur Govindan Asan who was a famous Sanskrit scholar. The teacher was full of praise for his student's abilities as a writer. Kumaran had written a few poems and showed some to Guru. Even though Guru was highly impressed with his extraordinary skills, he advised the budding poet not to write erotic love poems. Guru not only encouraged the literary skills of the young poet but guided him to elevate his creativity for higher ideals and for the betterment of society. After a few months Guru was visiting the *Velayudhan Nada* temple at Vakkom which was not far from Kumaran's home. The two met there again. By then Kumaran was fully captivated by the gracious sway of Guru's spiritual prowess.

Later Guru visited Kulathoor Kblathukara, a village near Thiruvananthapuram, for consecrating the idol of Lord Siva on March 27, 1893. Many devotees thronged there to witness the auspicious occasion. Young Kumaran was one among them. Guru spotted the promising poet and called him to his side. After the ceremonies were over, Guru decided to test the aptitude of Kumaran as a poet. Being a master poet, Guru composed the first two lines of a proposed stanza and asked Kumaran to fill the rest. Instantly, Kumaran added the remaining two lines to complete it. The context was the deity of Lord Siva which was installed by Guru in the temple at Kolathukara. Guru was pleased with Kumaran's perfectly fitting lines and immediately invited him to join as a disciple.

Soon Kumaran left home for good and joined Guru at the ashram in Aruvippuram. There Kumaran became the chief administrator of the Aruvippuram temple and its associated facilities. As Guru was convinced of the potential of the young disciple, he didn't want to tie down an exceedingly talented writer as a caretaker. Guru wanted Kumaran to realize his potential as a poet. To mould the budding

poet, Kumaran was entrusted with Dr Palpu for higher studies in Sanskrit and English. Guru wanted him to gain new insights and acquire advanced knowledge.

Dr Palpu was a unique philanthropist and supporter of Guru. He was only happy to carry out the mission assigned to him. Kumaran was thus sent to Bangalore, Madras and Calcutta for higher studies. He used the opportunity to enhance his knowledge both in Sanskrit and English. The exposure to the outside world ignited the budding intellectual in him. He also read many Eastern and Western classics. His stay in Calcutta for two years enabled him to know the rich Bengali literary traditions as well as the socio-religious reformative movements of modern India.

After returning from Calcutta, Kumaran became an inmate of the Aruvippuram Ashram and spearheaded many activities of the Sree Narayana movement. It was the historic association between Guru and Kumaran Asan that later made tremendous influence on the literary and social landscape of Kerala.

Dr Palpu, Kerala's Pioneer Social Activist

Around the time Sree Narayana Guru began his reformative efforts in southern Kerala, Dr Palpu was living in Mysore. He was deeply concerned about the plight of millions of his fellow brothers and sisters in his home state Kerala suffering under harsh caste rules. Palpu was born in the princely state of Travancore, now known as Kerala, into an aristocratic Ezhava family. Overcoming all adverse circumstances including social inequities, he successfully completed high school education in 1883. He then applied for admission in the medical school of Travancore, took the examination for admission and won the second highest score in the exam.

Since Palpu belonged to the "untouchable" Ezhava caste, the Travancore kingdom shamelessly denied him admission to the medical school. But Palpu was not discouraged. He went on to secure admission in the prestigious Medical College of Madras. During that time, Velayudhan, his older brother, was working in a prominent position under the British government in Madras. Velayudhan was among the first seven people who acquired a Bachelor of Arts degree

in Travancore. He was also the first from the Ezhava community to achieve the feat. But when he applied for a government job in Travancore, the kingdom denied him work citing his Ezhava caste. Later, under the British government, he rose to prominence and retired as a well recognized administrator.

Having successfully matriculated as a physician from the prestigious Madras Medical College, Dr Palpu returned to Travancore aspiring for a suitable position. There were very few qualified doctors in Travancore, that too having a medical degree from a British managed institution. So, he confidently applied for a suitable position in Travancore. Again, however, though he was fully qualified, the Travancore government denied him the opportunity. Moreover, he was badly insulted for daring to apply for a prestigious position under the kingdom of Travancore which regarded Ezhavas as "untouchables". During that time, not a single person from the Ezhava caste was employed by the Travancore government even at a meager monthly salary of five rupees. The government of Travancore was then dominated by Brahmins, and only people of elite castes were given jobs in the royal government.

To the administrators of the Travancore government, Dr Palpu was only an Ezhava. His qualifications did not matter to them. They advised him to pursue the traditional work of Ezhavas. It should be noted that Ezhavas in Kerala generally engaged in toddy-tapping, cloth weaving and agriculture. Also, there were many *Ayurvedic* medical practitioners among the community. A wide range of social commentators expressed that the Travancore kingdom purposely insulted the young Ezhava as he sought a job in the medical service. Many believe that the royals specifically suggested that the youth follow the traditional work of toddy-tapping even though he was the most qualified person at that time for the post of medical practitioner.

But Dr Palpu was no ordinary person. Soon after the denial of a job in Travancore, with the help of his brother, Dr Palpu secured a job as superintendent of the vaccine unit in the Medical department of the Madras government. The Madras province was under the direct rule of British. In 1890 Dr Palpu became the first person from the Ezhava community to hold such a prestigious position. After a year his office was moved to Bangalore.

He was sent to Europe for higher studies in Bacteriology by the British government. He acquired degrees and certificates from many prestigious institutions including University of Cambridge. Dr Palpu's dedicated service in fighting the plague epidemic that haunted Bangalore in 1896 helped to save thousands of lives. Even though Dr Palpu had to face numerous hurdles in professional as well as personal life, he achieved his intended destination with his power of will and strength of character.

Dr Palpu could have led a life of luxury and comfort in Mysore with his lucrative and dignified position. Rather he was always worrying about the downtrodden people of Travancore. He influenced prominent personalities in India and abroad through his writings and conversations about the deplorable situation in Travancore. He often visited Travancore from Mysore to organize efforts to improve the plight of untouchables.

He ran two massive signature campaigns under the banner Malayali Memorial and then Ezhava Memorial and presented memorandums to Sree Moolam Thirunal Maharaja, the local king. Dr Palpu was the third signatory on the Malayali Memorial of 1891. The Malayali Memorial highlighted the grievances of the native people as subjects of the state of Travancore and highlighted their lack of accessibility to government services.

The result of the Malayali Memorial was historic. It paved the way for opening government jobs to natives of Travancore for the first time. Unfortunately, the favour was not extended to Ezhavas and other "untouchable" communities. The prejudiced government of Travancore at that time considered people from those communities, however qualified, not fit for holding prestigious government jobs. Dr Palpu, even though frustrated at the response of the government, was not discouraged. He again ran a campaign and collected from members of the Ezhava community over 13,000 signatures and presented it to the king in 1896. Even though the Hindu kingdom was willing to offer government positions to the converted people from lower castes to Christianity, it continued to shut its doors to Ezhavas and other oppressed communities.

As justice was not served for the downtrodden majority, Dr Palpu lavishly spent his own savings to bring the blatant injustices to the

attention of British Parliament as Great Britain was the supreme ruler of all Indian states including Travancore. Dr Palpu and his comrade Barrister G.P. Pillai were at the forefront of keeping the issue alive by writing a series of articles in London newspapers. Using the influence of Margaret Noble, popularly known as Sister Nivedita who was the European disciple of Swami Vivekananda, the plight of Ezhavas of Travancore was raised in British Parliament in 1897. Unfortunately, even their efforts failed to produce the desired result as the British government adopted a policy of non-involvement in the religious-related issues of the locals. But Dr Palpu's continuous efforts began to shake the caste-ridden castles of Travancore.

Dr Palpu's pro-active involvement was crucial for the establishment of S.N.D.P. Yogam and the emancipation of millions of downtrodden people from centuries of dehumanizing experiences. It is quite coincidental that Dr Palpu was also born in 1863, the same year Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States, signed the historic Emancipation Proclamation freeing the American Negroes from the clutches of slavery.

Vivekananda's Counsel

Swami Vivekananda, the legendary *sanyasin* from Bengal, was on an all-India pilgrimage prior to his historic trip to the West for attending the First World Parliament of Religions. After visiting the princely state of Mysore, Vivekananda was planning to go to Rameswaram via Tamil Nadu. Originally, no place in Kerala figured in his list.

When Vivekananda was visiting Bangalore in November 1892, the king of Mysore invited the *sanyasin* to the palace. During that time Vivekananda was largely unknown outside the circle of a few loyalists. Dr Palpu, the personal physician of the Maharaja of Mysore, was staying in Bangalore. Dr Palpu used the occasion to establish a close relationship with the young *sanyasin*. As Dr Palpu shared with him the baggage of grievances of the "untouchable" communities in Kerala, Swami Vivekananda related to his frustration. They both developed a sense of fraternity and closeness. Before leaving Bangalore, Vivekananda paid a visit to the residence of Dr Palpu and stayed there for two days.

It was a relieving experience for Dr Palpu. He had several discussions on the socio-religious situations of Kerala with Swami Vivekananda. It was through the efforts of Dr Palpu that Vivekananda realized the intensity of oppression suffered by the lower caste Hindus in Kerala. The Hindu kingdom ruling Travancore was keen on indefinitely perpetuating these illogical and insensible rules. Vivekananda believed that in India drastic social changes were possible only through the medium of religion and spirituality. As such, Dr Palpu was advised that the guidance and blessings of a spiritual master was essential to spreadhead a movement and to give it a moral authority as it sought to achieve complex objectives.

During his travels around India, Swami Vivekananda made a detour and came to Kerala and visited a few places including TTissur, Ernakulam and Travancore. He also decided to extend the journey to Kanyakumari, the southern tip of India. Kerala was going through a state of chaos when Swami Vivekananda arrived there in 1892. Most probably, Dr Palpu's heartfelt revelations on Kerala's cursed caste practices prompted Vivekananda to alter his previously determined travel destinations.

The nine days of stay in the princely state of Travancore during December 1892 enabled Vivekananda not only to understand the gravity of Kerala's horrendous practice of untouchability but also to directly witness and experience the tyrannical caste practices. Vivekananda was dismayed by the irrational customs of the Hindu kingdom that persecuted people of lower castes who remained as loyal Hindus defying the lure of religious conversions.

In the Travancore Kingdom, the discriminatory caste-rules applied only to those who remained as Hindus. Once those lower caste victims converted into Christianity or Islam, it enabled them to automatically escape the centuries-old caste rules. In addition, they became eligible for many privileges that had been denied to them as Hindus. Vivekananda was puzzled by its illogicity. He witnessed the weird attitudes ingrained in the very nature of the people of the princely state. Swami Vivekananda branded the princely state of Travancore to be nothing but a "lunatic asylum". He characterized the ignorant masses blindly observing the caste rules as lunatics.

Vivekananda left Travancore with a heavy heart. He proceeded to Kanyakumari, swam a mile away from the shore of the mighty Indian Ocean to reach a grand rock that stood above the sea. The young monk sat alone on that rock for long hours immersed in meditation. He knew that saving India from centuries of foreign rule and slavery was not easy. More than political slavery, he realized, Indians were seriously infected by the psychological complex of inferiority, religious malfunction, superstitions, illiteracy and poverty. The lack of hope, spirit and the accumulated lethargy among the destitute masses of India distressed his mind. The plight of the poor who had been trapped in a long and dark tunnel without any ray of light or hope pained his heart. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he reminisced on the pathetic scenes he had witnessed across India from the very north to south and from the east to western coast.

After a few months, Vivekananda reached Chicago to represent Hinduism at the first World Parliament of Religions. He won the hearts and minds of the West with his passionate presentation on September 11, 1893. Vivekananda's memorable speech became pivotal in the understanding between the West and the East. Without doubt, Swami Vivekananda's inspiring influence instilled a new wave of enthusiasm and nationalism across India, especially among the educated youth.

Vivekananda, who was conscious of the fundamental traits of India's social, religious and spiritual nature, believed that an effective and strong reform movement could not be successful unless guided by a spiritual figure. Even though Swami Vivekananda had very limited participation or direct role in the fight against the caste system of Kerala, his inspiration made a formidable impact in the minds of many social activists including Dr Palpu. Swami Vivekananda attained *Samadhi* in 1902 but his energetic life and inspiring messages continued to influence the earlier leadership of the S.N.D.R Yogam such as Dr Palpu and Kumaran Azan.

Birth of S.N.D.P. Yogam

Dr Palpu was familiar with Sree Narayana Guru since childhood. Guru was a frequent visitor to Dr Palpu's ancestral home in

Thiruvananthapuram and he was close to Palpu's father as well as uncles. At that time Guru was in his twenties and was popularly known as Naanu Asan or Naanu Bhakta. The family resumed that close relationship with Guru soon after he returned from the long years of penance and meditations in Maruthwamala and Aruvippuram. Dr Palpu always viewed Guru with reverence. His family members served as founding members of the Vavootu Yogam organized by Guru in Aruvippuram.

Since the installation of the Siva Temple in 1888, Dr Palpu had been following Guru closely and was an active supporter of his mission of socio-religious awakening. As Guru visited Dr Palpu's home in Bangalore in 1895, around eight years before the formation of S.N.D.P. Yogam, along with young Kumaran for his higher education in Sanskrit and English, Dr Palpu was only happy to receive them. Guru had high hopes from his promising disciple. Dr Palpu gladly offered his time, money and guidance to groom young Kumaran to be a towering social activist of his time and the most recognized face of modern Malayalam literature.

Whenever Dr Palpu visited Travancore, he used to discuss with Guru how to improve the lives of the people. Dr Palpu was aware and appreciative of Guru's grand reformatory efforts in southern Kerala. Guru also admired Dr Palpu's humanitarian activities in Mysore and Kerala. Even after years of strenuous efforts, Dr Palpu was still frustrated with the results of his work to uplift the downtrodden in Travancore.

So, when Dr Palpu visited Guru again, he had in his mind the inspiring guidance of Swami Vivekananda that a strong and stable organization guided by a spiritual master was a prerequisite to solve the social ills of Kerala. Dr Palpu shared his views with Guru. Kumaran Asan joined them. He was Guru's devoted deputy at Aruvippuram. He had just returned to Kerala from Calcutta after his Sanskrit education. After serious discussions, they agreed to transform the existing organization for managing the Aruvippuram temple into a state-wide organization with a larger mission.

Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam or S.N.D.P. Yogam was formed on May 15, 1903, with Guru as its permanent President, Palpu as Vice-President and Kumaran Asan as General Secretary. Guru

envisioned the organization's primary goals as proliferation of faith and spirituality along with education, organization and entrepreneurship among the weaker sections of the society. S.N.D.P. Yogam is regarded as the first and the largest socio-cultural organization in Kerala.

Contrary to the aspirations of Guru, S.N.D.P. Yogam was attracting its membership primarily from the Ezhava community barring a few exceptions. As it was being perceived as a caste organization rather than a casteless and universal movement Guru had aspired, he decided to sever his formal relationship with it to preserve his personal integrity and philosophical convictions. Still the Ezhava community en masse continues to regard Guru as its supreme spiritual and religious master.

Reverberations

Beginning with the establishment of the temple of Lord Shiva at Aruvippuram and then with the formation of S.N.D.P. Yogam, Kerala underwent revolutionary social and cultural transformation. On the social front, the effects were evident immediately. It inspired and even forced other backward as well as forward communities to reform. Soon a host of leaders, social reformers and free-thinkers emerged on the scene. The stagnant nature and the collective inertia that characterized the society for centuries began to dissipate. An atmosphere of vitality and optimism settled in. New perspectives as well as emerging personalities began to influence the society.

At first, the downtrodden communities began to stir after centuries of stagnation. They made organized efforts to gain access to education, right to worship, freedom to walk and to obtain other basic rights. This social reformation movement was led by the Ezhavas under the inspiration of Sree Narayana Guru. Due to the placement of Ezhavas in the social hierarchy, this new development had the ability to shake the whole foundation of the social structure in Kerala.

Within the Ezhava community in which S.N.D.P. Yogam was primarily active, a host of visionary leaders emerged besides Dr Palpu and Kumaran Asan. It was because of the convincing efforts of T.K. Madhavan, a prominent leader of the S.N.D.P. Yogam, that the Indian

National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi agreed to include eradication of untouchability as a goal of the freedom movement.

Following the Ezhavas, community after community began to reform themselves. In the process, the society underwent revolutionary changes. The role played by Mahatma Ayyankali and Pundit Karuppan in this regard deserve special mention. The Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam was formed under the leadership of Ayyankali for improving the plight of the Dalit community of Pulayas. Later, in 1912, another backward organization working among the fishermen community was formed under the leadership of Pundit Karuppan. The leaders of those communities regularly sought Guru's counsel and blessings as they were often faced with stringent opposition from the privileged castes.

The irony was that the so-called upper caste communities including Brahmins and Nairs also suffered from major deficiencies though they appeared to be relatively privileged. Among the Brahmins and Nairs, joint family system was the norm. So, many individual families lived together under one senior guardian. The set-up not only limited the individuality and freedom of the households, but also presented serious moral lapses.

In the Brahmin community, popularly known as Namboodiris in Kerala, for keeping the family property undivided, only the eldest son was allowed into a formal marriage. Because of this peculiar arrangement, the pool of men among the community who were qualified for marriage was small. So, many young women among the Brahmin community were not able to get suitable partners. This situation paved the way for multiple partners for the elder male member. It was not unusual that older men even in the seventies got married to girls aged seventeen or younger. As these poor girls became widows within a short span of time, they were forced to remain widowed forever under strict moral rules. Even for the slight suspicion of violating the moral codes, they faced serious punishments. The helpless Brahmin women enjoyed no freedom. Their dilemma was further complicated by the denial of even basic education to them. Even though on the peripheral level the plight of the Nair women appeared entirely different, their life was equally or

more miserable. The Brahmin youths who were denied the privilege of formal marriage got into informal and illegitimate relationships with Nair women without any parental responsibility.

Among the upper castes, the Brahmins in 1908 and Nairs in 1914 formed their own community organizations to reform their respective communities. It was V.T. Bhattathiripad who championed the causes of the Brahmins. He gratefully acknowledged in his autobiography *Dakshinayanam* the influence of Guru's philosophy and thoughts in shaping his guiding principles. It was Chattampi Swamikal who first awakened the Nairs about the many ills of the community and the need to get rid of Brahminical supremacy over them. Later Mannathu Padmanabhan gave energetic leadership to the community and led them to modernization.

S.N.D.P. Yogam along with other organizations such as the Nair Service Society agitated against caste discrimination that was characteristic of the Travancore State government during that time. Due to their collective struggle, the State Civil Service was opened for non-Brahmin communities in Travancore. The non-Brahmin higher castes were the real beneficiaries of agitations led by Dr Palpu and S.N.D.P. Yogam with the support of other communities under the banner "Malayalee Memorial." It took years of strenuous struggle by the S.N.D.P. Yogam and the Ezhava community to gain certain basic rights for the underprivileged communities.

Ezhavas of Kerala

The Ezhavas are a community primarily based in Kerala. They are also known as Thiyyas in the Malabar region and Billavas in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. Traditionally they were also considered as an "untouchable" class like many other downtrodden castes in the Hindu social structure. Nevertheless, there were many generations of families among them who were Sanskrit scholars, Ayurvedic physicians and highly skilled weavers which indicated a glorious past before the advent of the caste system.

According to the caste identities of Kerala, Ezhavas are placed in the middle of the caste hierarchy. Brahmins to Nairs, commonly

identified as Savarnas, complete the top half of the caste structure while Ezhavas to Dalits, known as Avamas or "untouchables", fill the bottom half. Due to the unique social placement of Ezhavas, any interruption within the Ezhavas was bound to create an impact in the entire society from top to bottom. So, it was highly effective to trigger changes in the wider society of Kerala by effecting reforms among the Ezhavas. As Sree Narayana Guru was born among the Ezhavas, the community naturally became a platform for launching and implementing his reformatory ideals. This had a significant impact in effectively altering the foundations of the caste-ridden society of Kerala.

For centuries, Ezhavas represented the major chunk of the labour class in Kerala. Historians believe that Ezhavas owned old vast areas of farmland in Kerala before the arrival of Brahmins to the region. According to some historians, the Ezhavas and Nairs belonged to a single community originally. During the implementation of Brahmin-based theocracy, those who opposed Brahminism were branded the "untouchable" community. Those who accepted the Sudra status within the *Chatur- Varna* system came to be known as Nairs and those who opposed the imposition of Brahmin-based caste system became Ezhavas.

As a result, Ezhavas lost many of their traditional privileges. While the Nairs rose in status due to the support of the Brahmins and the caste-observing royal class, the Ezhavas were pushed down socially and financially. Eventually the common ancestry of Nairs and Ezhavas became a thing of the past and the two communities became fully estranged. Strangely, in many regions of Kerala, the remnants of their common heritage were symbolized by the continuation of the observation of certain rites and customs.

Historians believe that before assimilating into the Hindu social structure, Ezhavas were followers of Buddhism and they possessed centuries of prestige and prominence in Kerala society. Fortunately, many among them preserved some vital aspects of their heritage including the knowledge of Sanskrit and practice of Ayurveda even after the weakening of Buddhist influence.

It was during the 7th century A.D. that the *Saiva-Vaishnava* devotional movement arrived in Kerala as a new religious based spiritual force. The temple culture of Kerala began during this period.

Some historians believe that many Buddhist temples were converted into Hindu shrines due to the influence of the devotional movement. Many Buddhist priests were transformed into priests of the new Hindu temples. These priests were the forefathers of the unique group of Namboodiris in Kerala. Later, Namboodiris were assimilated into the Brahmin priestly class.

Eminent Malayalam research scholar and historian Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai noted that before A.D 700, Ezhavas, Nairs and Namboodiris belonged to a single community with a Buddhist background. Many temples in Kerala still follow the art and cultural traditions of its Buddhist past. At least for the next two centuries, the caste-based discrimination was absent in Kerala and all sections participated in the affairs of the temples with equal dignity. The land-owning Ezhava lords and other aristocratic Ezhava families made significant contributions to temples. They also participated in the administration and other affairs of the temples. Many prominent shrines were under the joint management of Ezhavas and Nairs. The folklores were pregnant with the theme that underscored the dignified roles of many Ezhava chieftains as experts in martial arts and commanders of private armies.

It was during the 9th century that Ezhavas gradually began to lose such privileges as the priestly class rose in stature and influence. Ezhavas were ousted from their traditional roles in the temples and in the community as Nairs and Namboodiris assumed the charge of running the temples and its vast wealth. All land became the property of the temples and Ezhavas were demoted as tenants and farm workers. The new social order was brutally enforced with the organized militant power of the upper castes. Even then there were exceptions. Many Ezhava families here and there held on to their traditional heritage.

The *Travancore State Manual*, a formal collection of data concerning the land and people of Kerala, provides critical information on the origin and social status of Ezhavas in early centuries. The mammoth document was compiled by a senior official of the Travancore kingdom and was published in 1906. According to this manual, Ezhavas constituted the largest group of people in the kingdom and occupied a dignified status in the community as Sanskrit scholars,

traditional teachers, Ayurvedic physicians, astrologers, expert weavers, and farmers. Even though Ezhavas in general were victims of untouchability and other caste-related maladies, many in the community possessed dignified status in society.

The existence of generations of expert Ayurvedic practitioners as well as families of Sanskrit scholars in Kerala belonging to the Ezhava community is a prime example of the rich tradition they inherited from Buddhism. Foremost among them was Kallat Itty Achuthan Vaidyar, a prominent Ezhava Ayurvedic physician from Cherthala in Kerala.

Itty Achuthan Vaidyar, the legendary Ayurvedic scholar of Ezhava origin, was the resource person behind the authoritative botanical book "*Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*" published in Amsterdam in 1678. The book was compiled by Hendrick van Rheede, the then governor of Dutch Malabar, and written in Latin over a period of 30 years. The book was published in 12 volumes from 1678-1693. Each volume consists of around 200 pages. The book consists of the descriptions and illustrations of around 780 rare plants of Kerala as well as the indigenous use and medical properties of those medicinal plants. A testimonial letter signed by Itty Achuthan Vaidyer on April 20, 1675 appears on page 13 of the first volume. His ancestral home was declared a protected heritage monument by the government of Kerala recently. As an expert consultant on the massive project, he left for Amsterdam in his youth and lived there until death. Even though Itty Achuthan Vaidyer remained largely an unknown figure to the world until the last decade, his name became popular with the translation of *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus* to English in 2003.

Other prominent *Ayurveda* physicians from the Ezhava community were Uppottu Kannan Vaidyer, who authored the book of medicine "*Yogamrutham*" Thayyil Krishnan Vaidyer, who created the Ayurvedic Encyclopedia, Chalayil Kunjumami Vaidyer and Marthandan Vaidyer of Chavarkottu. Even though the healing and wellness properties of Ayurveda are recognized worldwide now, the world has yet to recognize the invaluable contributions of many of those traditional physicians of yesteryears. An Ayurvedic Encyclopedia was first published in Malayalam by an Ezhava physician, Kumaran Krishnan Vaidyer, also known as Kittu Asan, a native of Alappuzha. The

government of India printed this book in Sanskrit in 1966. It was Uppottu Kannan, another Ezhava from the Malabar region, who translated the *Astanga-Hrudayam*, an authoritative classical guide on Ayurveda, from Sanskrit to Malayalam.

Ezhavas were also credited with the large-scale farming of coconut trees and were considered experts in manufacturing many hand-made products associated with the coconut industry. Many among the Ezhavas were gifted with the spirit of entrepreneurship. According to the *Travancore State Manual*, only an insignificant section of the Ezhavas was engaged as toddy-tapers.

The Ezhavas occupy a unique status in the history of Kerala, and many from the Ezhava community have been the leading figures in social, political and literary fields of the region. According to the most recent census data, they form around one-third of the total population of Kerala. Socially and politically, Ezhavas traditionally represent the most progressive block of Kerala society and were the pioneer supporters of many liberal movements. The first democratically elected communist government in the world assumed power in Kerala in 1957. That was made possible with the predominant support of the Ezhava community. However legitimate, that political statement was indicative of their hopes and aspirations for a just society.

Sivagiri Hills

Founding a New Ashram

Guru always enjoyed travelling to places far and near. It was during one of his travels that he noticed the uniqueness of the Sivagiri hills in Varkala. The serene location was an ideal place for Guru whenever he desired to stay alone for a while or to escape from the daily intrusion of visitors. Varkala, a hilly region around thirty miles north of Thiruvananthapuram, has been a pilgrim place due to the presence of an ancient Vishnu temple there.

Millions of Hindus throng the Varkala beach named Papanasham to perform annual rituals for their departed relatives on the auspicious occasion of the new moon day during the last month of the Malayalam calendar. Ezhavas and other lower caste devotees who attended the traditional rituals used to face discrimination by the Brahmin priests. Guru's presence in Sivagiri began to attract the poor masses to his abode.

In 1904 Guru established an ashram on the hills. Soon it became his headquarters as well as a pilgrimage center for his devotees. Guru opened there an evening school for the disadvantaged section of the society who had no way of attending public schools. To aid poor and orphaned students who stayed in Sivagiri as inmates, Guru opened a small-scale business industrial unit for making clothes. Guru also started English and Sanskrit schools, thus declaring his vision of education for future generations.

By then, Guru's fame had reached all over Kerala. His divinity and spiritual prowess were accepted by almost everyone. Even the royal government of Travancore was not an exemption. In its census report of 1901 the government described Guru as "a Sankrit scholar and a pious religious reformer." The Travancore government also issued an extraordinary proclamation in 1904 in recognition of his status as a holy personality. According to the royal ordinance, Sree Narayana Guru was exempted from appearing in courts regarding any civil legal disputes.

The Goddess of Wisdom

Since the installation of Lord Siva at Aruvippuram in 1888, Guru established many temples across South India for the socio-spiritual improvement of the downtrodden masses. Guru intended these temples to be open for all devotees irrespective of caste or creed unlike other existing temples controlled by higher castes. Guru's temples were revolutionary in many aspects.

Guru desired to take his spiritual revolution to the next phase to match his vision and to elevate the spiritual aptitude of devotees. So, in Sivagiri, Guru intended to build a temple for Goddess Sarada, the prime deity of knowledge and wisdom. Thus, the concept of the *Sarada Mutt* was considered as the second phase in Guru's progressive spiritual and religious reformation process. As the devotees gathered to celebrate Guru's birthday in 1908, the foundation stone was laid during that celebratory atmosphere for the Sarada temple. The construction was completed by 1912.

Guru conceived the shrine differently in structural style as well as spiritual outlook than the usual temples which existed elsewhere

in India. He called it as Sarada Mutt. On the structural level, the magnificent eight-cornered structure was decorated with windows of coloured glass panels even though the traditional temples had no provision for windows. Its courtyard was covered in soft white sand. Mango trees and jackfruit trees were planted to provide perfect shade so that devotees could rest in comfort.

Guru avoided constructing a pond which was an essential element of traditional temples as he believed that its cleanliness couldn't be guaranteed. Rather he recommended individual bath houses near the temple. In temples across India even today non-Brahmins are rarely allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum as priests. But in 1912 Guru deployed youth inmates of Sivagiri ashram who happened to be from the Pulaya community, the caste of "untouchables" who belong to the very bottom of the caste hierarchy, as priests in the shrine of goddess Sarada. It was for the first time in the history of India that the so-called Dalits were assigned as priests in any major temple.

The beautiful idol of Sarada was seated on a white lotus flower. Guru implemented a simple and pious mode of worship, avoiding time consuming and resource draining rites. In traditional temples, the ceremonial feeding of specially cooked food called *nivedyam* and ritual bath of the deity called *abhishekam* with ghee, oil, and milk are essential. Guru avoided it all. Rather he preferred the reciting of hymns, highlighting the need of cleansing the interior of the devotee. For this purpose, Guru composed a beautiful hymn titled "*Jananee Navaratna Manjari*": replete with rhythm, symbolic beauty, philosophical depth as well as perfect devotion.

"Daivadasakam": A Universal Prayer

Soon the Sivagiri ashram became a center of attraction. People began to flow in large numbers to pay obeisance to Guru as well as Goddess Sarada. During that time, there were not even a handful of worship places open to all members of the society. The temples consecrated by Guru were the only exceptions.

The majority of the people were ignorant of the proper modes of worship and lacked meaningful prayers for recitation. The situation was far worse in the case of Dalits, who had been traditionally kept

away from normal interactions with other social groups. Without the opportunity to cultivate a culture of positive faith, many of the downtrodden communities led a life of despair and gloom without any ray of hope.

So, in his ashram at Sivagiri, Guru consciously admitted a few Dalit children as inmates and provided them all facilities including formal education to become ideal members of the society. They were treated by Guru as his own close companions. Young Dalits were given lessons in Sanskrit. Besides they were given training in deity worship and temple rituals and were appointed as priests in the Sarada temple. Guru courageously broke all precedents by bestowing rare privileges to that fortunate group. It was for their daily recitation, that Guru composed *Daiva-dasakam*, the universal prayer.

Whenever Guru consecrated a temple or installed a deity, he was in the habit of composing hymns or prayers for the devotees. He composed them with a specific purpose. Guru's compositions significantly differed in theme and character from those hymns that were in practice during that time. Beyond praising the deity, Guru used prayers as a medium to gradually elevate the devotee into a higher plateau of philosophical understanding. All of Guru's hymns were replete with such higher motives. Like Leonardo Davincii who was believed to have left hidden codes in his works of art at the Sistine Chappel in Rome, Guru in his many hymns implicitly superimposed the principles of *advaita* or non-duality.

A person lacking faith in God is like a ship without a captain in a stormy ocean. It is a Himalayan task to perpetually sustain an undivided mind in the thoughts of God but the intended effect can be achieved by visualizing every being in the universe as the manifestations of God. External means seldom lead a person towards the realization of God. The God-experience has to be attained by awakening our internal eye. This is not possible until an individual conquers the the mind through the withdrawal of all senses.

Daiva-dasakam is widely recognized as a universal prayer for many reasons. India's long spiritual culture and devotional traditions are replete with *mantras*, hymns and prayers of numerous forms and categories. Traditionally, such compositions address a specific deity or Vedic god. That characteristic remains the pattern of most popular

prayers even in modern times. There are prayers or hymns addressing Lord Vishnu or Lord Shiva. These prayers seldom directly address a universal God who is not confined to a limited sect or particular faith.

As a result, prayers followed by a religion may not be appealing to people who do not share that faith. In that respect, *Daivadasakam* is different from most other prayers. First of all, it addresses a universal God who is not confined within the pantheon of deities traditionally worshipped in India. Secondly, it does not address the supreme object of worship or God by a specific name familiar in other world religions. In general, *Daivadasakam* is not calling the Supreme Being by the customized terminology of any specific religion. The uniqueness of *Daivadasakam* can also be seen in its terminology, meaning and scope. As a result, people of faith from any religious background may use it as an ideal prayer.

While *Daivadasakam* guides the ideal devotees to reach the higher realms of spirituality through a gradual process of self-uplifting, it also tries to satisfy the moral, ethical, material and spiritual requirements of devotees who are at various levels of understanding. The opening lines unequivocally declare that unflinching faith is a prerequisite for gaining a sense of security, confidence in life and wisdom. Guru believed that satisfying the basic material or physical needs was a prerequisite for a common person to gradually move upward through the various stages in the ladder of higher or noble needs leading towards self-actualization. Thus *Daivadasakam* symbolically represents a theological version of the hierarchy of needs having physical as well as spiritual dimensions. The hierarchy, according to *Daivadasakam*, begins with satisfying lower level needs and then moving upward before reaching the ultimate destination identified as infinite ecstasy.

Social Reformation

Reforming Society

Beyond the issues of social injustice with its dehumanizing experiences, the society was seriously affected by moral, ethical and cultural ills when Sree Narayana Guru began his mission at the dawn of the 20th century. As Guru continued his mission of uplifting people from the depth of ignorance and helplessness, there were still countless people in the region who led lives far worse than animals. Lack of basic education for generations made them accept the belief that their plight was the *karmic* result of their past lives. They found no reason to escape from their pitiful state. As a result, generations after generations perished like flies without any sense of basic human dignity. Moreover, their superstitious faith in meaningless customs and in deplorable forms of worship was another cause of serious concern. Out of fear of mysterious forces,

they performed evil rituals such as animal sacrifice that were a drain on their economic well being.

The concept of family also was under threat as the institution of marriage was compromised by primitive practices such as polyandry and polygamy. People who followed such practices didn't feel any sense of shame as such social relationships were considered the norm by the general population.

As the fearless commander of the socio-religious reform movement, Guru's involvement had a dramatic effect in ending many age-old customs and social traditions that were harmful in many ways. On many occasions, Guru abruptly presented himself during the climax of social and religious functions to stop them. After arriving at such venues, he would immediately call the head of the family to inform in mild language his displeasure or disagreement over such meaningless ceremonies. Although such interferences were more than stunning experiences to those who were in the process of carrying them out, miraculously, with utmost devotion and honour, everyone complied. Having full faith in the strong convictions of Guru, none of the householders took such incidents as insults and they never felt humiliated. Guru still was in his youth while he was initiating these grand reforms but his divine appeal and sagely appearance were more than effective in overpowering the mind of the masses.

There is a long list of events that exemplified Guru's acceptance among the people, especially within the Ezhavas, as their sole guide and spiritual master. Once, Guru went to the midst of a *kettukalyanam*, the venue of a traditionally mandated mock marriage ceremony, to stop it from taking place. The incident took place in 1911 at Neyyatinkara. The practice ended forever. On another occasion, Guru similarly interfered while another senseless religious ritual was conducted at the home of an influential and wealthy devotee in Muttom village in Alappuzha. Throughout his life Guru issued statements expressing his convictions on many matters of social reform and provided specific guidelines for transforming the lives of people.

In direct communication as well as through the medium of the S.N.D.P. Yogam, Guru strived to refine Kerala society. Using the organization as a platform, Guru used the reach of *Yogam* among the

Ezhava community to launch his ideals. His written instructions to the leaders of the organization in the form of letters reflected not only his vision on refining the society but also his pragmatic approaches as a social engineer. It proved the unquestionable acceptability he enjoyed among the people. His words were received as if those were from the Providence. For the first time in modern history, the region witnessed the rise of a spiritual leader with mass appeal over all sections.

Guru's letter of instructions in 1908 to S.N.D.P. Yogam contained his suggestions and proposals for bringing profound changes in the society. In that letter, Guru highlighted his preferred action plan to bring the desired social changes. The first topic of discussion was on religion. Referring to the enthusiasm among the people in the construction of new temples, Guru wanted the officials of the organization to conduct a self appraisal and objective analysis on the merits and demerits of that new endeavour. Guru's perception was that the temple movement failed to fetch the desired result he had hoped as Guru had an entirely different set of priorities. Guru aspired to transform temples as centers of learning. He reminded his followers that knowing the fundamentals of religious theology and its values were more important than relying on the artificial attributes of faith. Guru called for cultivating a genuine faith having a permanent place for God in the heart.

Guru gave strict instructions as well as mild suggestions to cut wasteful spending associated with various ceremonies and rituals at different stages of life including birth, death and marriage. The pity was that the financially well off among those downtrodden communities had relished a life of luxury and vanity. Unfortunately, they found no reason to help their less fortunate brethren as they lacked any understanding of service to others while following a life of extravagance. Lavish festivities that served no purpose were too common. One such weird celebration was *thirandu-kuli* associated with the occurring of the first menstruation of girls. Another wasteful event was *kettu-kalyanam* which was a mock marriage between a boy and a girl in their early childhood which had no bearing on their adult life. In addition, there was an array of faith-based rituals that were a drain on financial resources.

As the sun was silently rising on the 20th century preparations for a new dawn were emerging across the region. Amid gloom and despair, hope could be seen. The sage of Aruvippuram had begun the process of extending his campaign of reform to neighbouring regions. The religious and moral ambiguities of centuries began to melt as reason and knowledge slowly found their way into the frozen minds of people. With the active guidance of Guru, the society began to understand the futility of many outdated customs and superstitious beliefs. Thus, Guru's courageous campaign of socio-religious and spiritual revolution that took off in 1888 began to foster a chain of positive changes.

Four Criteria to Develop Society

Sree Narayana Guru preferred to communicate his metaphysical visions and philosophical doctrines through mystical poetry. It was mostly meant for serious readers who consider life as a serious pursuit beyond the mundane affairs of day to day life. Yet, Guru was kind enough to consider the wellbeing of the masses that generally lack the time or frame of mind to go beyond the peripheral level of life. In fact, Guru's support to the social organizations and its just causes as well as missionary engagements were direct results of such compassionate considerations. Most of Guru's crispy messages in simple prose for educating and reforming the society were an attempt in this direction.

After the formation of S.N.D.P. Yogam in 1903 to lead social reforms in Kerala, Guru as its foremost moral authority set a few guidelines for its effective performance among the people. To avoid confusion concerning the customs and traditions on religious, social and cultural life, Guru gave specific instructions to follow in enhancing the quality of life of the masses. Under the guidance of Guru, S.N.D.P. Yogam took the initiatives to form a qualified team of volunteers who were well-versed in matters relevant to the people.

Guru instructed those eloquent speakers to use every opportunity to educate people using their talent at public speaking by delivering speeches on prescribed topics. Several criteria were given to determine the eligibility of qualifying speakers. The foremost among

them was thorough knowledge in the subject matter. Strict guidelines were given to avoid derogatory language and tone that would seem offensive to other constituents of the society. "Special attention shall be given to inspire the public on uplifting the poor and the despised members of the lower echelons of society in the caste hierarchy/" Guru noted. He identified mainly four principal areas for potential speakers: Religion, Ethics, Education and Entrepreneurism.

The society then was contaminated by an array of superstitious practices in the name of religion. Animal sacrifice was an inevitable component of many rituals. Worship of evil deities only promoted negative tendencies among the practitioners. Consumption of alcohol and animal flesh as part of worship was the norm. The degeneration was exasperated by the use of foul language in the place of hymns in many shrines of the lower castes. Unfortunately, such an absurd system of worship effectively held many of the downtrodden in a perpetual state of disgrace and subordination. Guru valued the role of refined religion and positive faith to civilize and empower the downtrodden. He instructed the speakers to prepare the people to replace their superstitious faith and associated customs with "pure Hinduism". Guru wanted the speakers to promote the construction of temples and monasteries to satisfy the religious and spiritual requirements of the people. He strictly warned the speakers against maligning other religions.

Guru's second emphasis was on the cultivation of an ethical life. He wanted the speakers to convince the listeners on the ramifications of one's actions and thoughts. People may indulge in detrimental behaviour without being conscious about its consequences. Like Buddha, Guru refrained from issuing commandments. He relied on the discretion of the individual decision makers in applying their free will and intelligence as they face challenging situations in life. Similar to the five principles of Buddha defining the moral and ethical obligations, Guru prescribed values such as truth, purity, fearfulness against transgressions, faith in Almighty and sense of unity among people.

Guru shared his vision on the dissemination of education as follows: "Make people aware of the benefits of acquiring education, and warn

them on the adverse effects of not gaining adequate knowledge and skills. Create a feeling of curiosity and self-pride so that in the future there shall be no man or woman among the community who does not have at least basic education. Wherever necessary, build educational institutions and libraries for the benefit of people, and pool the resources of the community if required."

The last but not the least was the topic of entrepreneurship. We tend to think about entrepreneurship as a modern or western concept but Guru was talking about it more than a century ago while living in a remote corner of India. Guru valued entrepreneurship as a tool to lift individuals and communities from social and economic backwardness. He aspired to inspire talented men and women to apply their unique skills to the use of the wider community in a mutually beneficial way. The following were Guru's list of priorities for the industrious individuals: Farming, trade, handicraft and industry. Guru advised people to refrain from vanity and luxury and to practice saving money. "Construct factories in suitable locations and if a single person is unable to afford such ventures, pool your resources to make it happen; Get adequate knowledge about specific industries in a scientific way; Cooperate and help each other to promote the spirit of entrepreneurship." He also advised strongly against tardiness and laziness, and wanted all healthy and able individuals to earn their living by their own toil.

Liberation through Education

As a sage and as a humanitarian, Sree Narayana Guru's approach to solving societal problems was always different and unique. Rather than turning people against people while attempting to change the unjust system, he diagnosed the problem more profoundly and compassionately. He identified the fundamental cause of all evils as the lack of genuine education among people. Guru's attempt was to uplift the whole society by removing the innate ignorance among them. Guru believed in the infinite power of knowledge. All his efforts, religious and social, were aimed at lifting people through

education. It was in this context that Guru offered a novel motto to the afflicted masses everywhere: "Liberation through education."

In the traditional sense, "knowledge" was mere a buzz word with religious connotations to denote the process of attaining *Moksha* or spiritual liberation. But Guru transformed the term as he began his reformatory efforts at the turn of the 20th century by incorporating social and economical dimensions to it. Like Prometheus, the Greek legend who regained fire from the gods for the benefit of humanity, Guru brought "knowledge", which was the exclusive prerogative of the elites for many centuries, back to the common masses. Educating the poor and the neglected thus became the most critical aspect of Sree Narayana Guru's missionary work.

The mission began long before he was being acknowledged as Guru. Right after finishing his formal education, he returned to Chempazhanti, his native village, and took the role of a traditional teacher or Asan. While students from the neighbourhood attended his classes during daytime, during many late evenings, he visited the homes of the people who belonged to the lowest stratum of the society and introduced to them the world of letters. As those illiterate people had to toil from daybreak in the fields of upper castes, they never had the opportunity to learn. So, many Dalits in the area in those days were benefited for the first time because of the voluntary initiatives of the compassionate young man. He gradually extended his network of schools to many other places beyond his native village.

The second phase began at Aruvipuram, where Guru consecrated the idol of Lord Siva in 1888. There he started a Sanskrit school as well as a training center to develop skills for various handicrafts. After he founded the monastery in Sivagiri in 1904, starting an evening school exclusively to help the neighbouring community of Kuravars, a group of Dalits, was one of his top priorities. He then began a Sanskrit school in Sivagiri and offered free food and accommodation to many poor students. Amazingly, Guru brought two technological experts from Tamil Nadu to the Sivagiri Ashram with the help of a few philanthropists to give special training to the young inmates in agriculture and mechanical technology. A few children from the Dalit community of Pulaya were adopted by Guru. He provided them special care as well as training in modern education.

In 1912 Guru installed *Goddess Sarada*, the deity of knowledge, in Sivagiri and built a simple but magnificent temple for the goddess. When Mahatma Gandhi visited in Sivagiri 1925, he was amazed by the cleanliness and beauty of the humble shrine. After Gandhi sought suggestions to uplift the lives of Dalits, Guru told him: "They need education and wealth." Gandhi was further perplexed as he found out that the young priests who conducted the service at the *Sarada temple* were Dalits. Guru not only believed but proved through action that the acquisition of education was the key to alleviate any potential grievances. When Guru addressed a gathering of Dalits in 1916 at Thiruvananthapuram, he assured them: "Make education the top most priority. Once you are adequately educated, everything else will follow." Ayyankali, the legendary Dalit leader of Kerala, was very close to Guru. Guru offered his support and advice whenever he came to him for guidance.

In response to a felicitation that was given to Guru in 1912 by the *Vingaana Vardhini Sabha*, which was based in Kochi, Guru reiterated the primacy of education. "Education will lift any community. So, work towards the proliferation of education. Not all people have the amenities for obtaining higher education. Help others whenever help is required. The rich among you shall collectively help those in need of help. Send talented students to foreign countries where they can get more advanced education. As the traditional education in Sanskrit is losing primacy in the new context, concentrate your efforts and resources to get quality education in English. Not only men but women shall be educated too," Guru stated.

If we look at the visionary temple concept of Guru, there also we can see the importance he gave to learning. He advised devotees to build libraries and reading rooms as well as open gardens along with the temples. Furthermore, Guru visualized temples to enhance the knowledge of the worshipping community along with their love of God. He said: "Build only small temples in the future. But build a large hall along with the temple so that people can gather together and listen to discourses and discussions on worthy topics."

In 1917, Guru made another prominent statement to highlight the importance of education. He stated forcefully: "Do not give priority to establishing new temples. If you feel it to be so essential, you may

build small temples. The main house of worship shall be facilities for learning. Use your scarce resources for building schools."

Various religious communities in Kerala along with the state and national governments have been actively working to educate the people for the last several decades. Today, Kerala is honoured as the most educated state in India. It achieved 100% literacy rate before the turn of the 21st century. This was a miraculous achievement from the dark days a century ago. Along with many other factors in improving Kerala's education which include the invaluable services of the Christian Church, Guru's role to turn the fate of the region has earned wide recognition.

Revolutionary Notions on Organization

An organization is generally defined as the joining together of a group of individuals for a collective goal. In basic terms, the participants as members of an organization collectively gain significantly higher leverage than the sum of their individual actions or efforts. Sree Narayana Guru's revolutionary call for collective and unified efforts through the medium of organization as a peaceful avenue for gaining power and leverage against injustice and inequality was a novel concept. It was passionately received by the weak and the destitute communities to redress centuries of wrongs.

Guru's novel message "Become enlightened through education and strengthened by organizing" offered a timely and balanced remedy for the social ills that haunted the southern regions of India at the dawn of the 20th century. Furthermore, through intense and intimate involvement among the masses, Guru provided the people of Kerala the guidance and courage for changing centuries-old customs. Thus, he empowered them for challenging taboos that had been left untouched until then.

It was Guru's guiding presence that gave the S.N.D.P. Yogam the strength and spirit to organize the millions of downtrodden masses during its early days. As Guru felt that the confines of S.N.D.P Yogam, primarily as a community organization, didn't always coincide with his philosophy and vision, he voluntarily retired from it as its formal head. But Guru was open enough to occasionally associate with the

Yogam whenever his presence was deemed a necessity. He used those occasions to confer worthy advice.

Guru's message to the S.N.D.P. Yogam as they gathered in the city of Pallathuruthy in mid-Kerala to celebrate a quarter century of existence captures his philosophical attitude towards the organization. He was appreciative of the fact that the S.N.D.P. Yogam was instrumental in making positive changes in the lives of so many in Kerala. But Guru had maintained all along that his goal was never to promote any one community or sect. None of his messages was meant for a specific section of people. The scope was always universal in nature.

To Guru, all humanity belonged to one caste, and using the medium of poetry, he had written down his universal definition on caste for all coming generations. At the Pallathuruthy session of the S.N.D.P. Yogam, Guru plainly stated his definition of an organization in unequivocal language:

"The goal of an organization shall not be to bring benefits to a few people. It shall not attempt to organize a specific community or an exclusive group of people. Our organization shall unreservedly be hospitable to all. Our concept of religion shall be routed in the individual freedom of faith. Its tenets shall be agreeable to all civilized men and women, and it should be able to lead all human beings towards a higher and noble ideal. Thus, the eternal doctrine "One Caste, One Religion, One God for humanity" itself is a religion. I regard it as ideal to admit all those who subscribe to this philosophy as members of our organization. Reformation of religion cannot succumb to leaving one faith group for the sake of joining another one."

Promoting Entrepreneurism

Sree Narayana Guru was unique among India's spiritual lore for many reasons. One of the main factors was Guru's concept on balancing the material needs of people along with their spiritual wants. To satisfy the material needs, people had to earn money. Guru advised entrepreneurship as the preferable avenue to financially develop the community as well as the individual. Many were the individuals who heeded Guru's ideas and tried their best to put his vision into action.

In the beginning decades of the 20th century, Kerala witnessed a rise of numerous small scale industries. With Guru's blessing, Andiyara Krishnan Muthalali of Paravoor, one of the pioneer industrialists among the Ezhava community, sent his son K.C. Karunakaran for higher studies to Europe in 1917. Karunakaran attended universities in the United Kingdom and Germany. He was instrumental in modernizing the Indian coir industry and won national and international recognition for his contributions to the industry. C.R. Kesavan Vaidyer was another individual of humble background who made a mark in global markets because of Sree Narayana Guru's personal advice. He also won numerous recognitions for a special brand of Ayurvedic soap known as Chandrika.

One of Guru's most popular messages has been "progress through trade and industry". But his ideas on business were significantly different from many of the traditional concepts on business. Guru tried to promote innovation, creativity, cooperation as well as the spirit of charity as part of the business model. He instructed business people to return a specific part of their profit to the community in charity for helping the less fortunate ones.

To Guru, business was more than an avenue for making money. He envisioned it also as an opportunity to serve communities. Many of his social activities such as the construction of temples, monasteries and schools were sponsored by the liberal financial backing of the new generation of businessmen from areas such as Karunagappally, Karthikappally and Chertahala in Kerala. It took decades after Guru for the modern business world to accommodate the concept of social responsibility of business as part of their business lexicon.

Denouncing Alcoholism

Sree Narayana Guru was considered the most vocal and pioneering critique of alcoholism at a time the world at large was not even concerned about the problem. Even though Guru had been discouraging the use of alcohol since the early stages of his public life, it was in 1913 that a specific incident was recorded as part of his mission against alcohol. Before the medical profession recognized the serious negative effects of alcohol, Guru dared to call it the most

dangerous poison. The American Medical Association officially declared alcoholism a disease or disorder in 1991.

While Guru was visiting the family of a devotee Runnel Sekhara Panicker of Vadayattu, near Kottayam in 1913, a drunkard approached him. Guru was not amused at his shoddy appearance. He questioned him: "Do you drink liquor?" In response, the man acknowledged his habit of drinking. "You shall not drink liquor in the future," Guru instructed, and gave him some grapes to eat.

A few hours after this encounter, the craving for alcohol began to haunt the man and he opted to ignore Guru's command. With that in mind, he ordered his wife to kill a chicken so that he could have a good meal while drinking. While his wife was busy preparing the dish, the man left to get a bottle of liquor. Mysteriously, he began to act like a frightened man as if he was being attacked by a strange being. Hearing his screams, a few people asked him what had happened. Hearing his account, they took him back to Guru who was resting at the home of Sekhara Panicker. Guru looked at him for a while and applied some ritual ashes on his forehead. Soon he began to act normal. He sought pardon and promised never to repeat the offense. Guru blessed the man and he gradually became a successful businessman.

It wasn't Guru's natural way to issue commands or ultimatums to his devotees or followers. He preferred to offer his opinions tenderly in the form of advice. Guru expected the receivers to evaluate its merits before voluntarily accepting or ignoring them. But on a few occasions, he didn't hesitate to deviate from his natural style as he felt strongly about the unacceptability and urgency of issues. One such issue was the consumption of alcohol.

While traveling widely throughout Kerala, Guru witnessed the negative impact of the abuse of alcohol on the lives of numerous families. A sizeable section of the Ezhavas was immersed under the influence of alcohol. To some, its production and distribution were a family business. The demeaning nature of the profession was effective in demoralizing a sizeable population of Ezhavas. It caused the degeneration of moral life of many families.

As a solution to the dire nature of the problem, Guru issued a statement to discourage the role of alcohol in society. The following

strongly worded statement of Guru was made public in 1920: "Liquor is poison! Don't make it, don't distribute it and don't drink it." To those apologists who argued that liquor making was a source of livelihood for many poor families, Guru retorted sarcastically: "Cut to pieces the sharp knife you use for making toddy (an alcoholic sap produced from coconut and palm trees by cutting its tender flower buds). That would be good for making at least four smaller knives for a barber. In fact, the profession of a barber is far better than of a toddy maker." Guru further opined that if untouchability had any relevance then that had to be applied against those who engage in liquor business. "Everybody abhors the foul odour emanating from a toddy maker. Close family members prefer to disassociate from a drunkard and even God will be indifferent towards such a filthy person."

Guru declared a total war on alcohol way before the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi began a crusade for imposing a total ban on the use of alcohol. It was in 1921 that the Ahmedabad session of the Indian National Congress passed a resolution appealing for the total prohibition of alcohol in India. Swayed by Guru's words, many Ezhavas gradually turned to other trades and to education, moving away from toddy-making.

In *Sree Narayana Dharmam*, a book compiled by Guru that consists of around three hundred Sanskrit verses as instructions for a *dharmaic* life, verses 82 to 87 explicitly talk about his strict warnings against the use of alcohol. Verse 82 strictly forbids the use of alcohol citing it as a poison. It is detrimental to the normal functioning of the brain. Guru then identifies all mood-altering substances including narcotics as *madya* or intoxication in one form or the other. In the next verse, he warns everybody to refrain from the production, distribution and consumption of alcoholic substances as it leads to immoral acts.

Unfortunately, the consumption of a host of new generation liquors such as whisky, brandy and vodka as well as the use of other forms of narcotic substances is on the rise in Kerala as well as in the rest of the world. International studies cite an array of biological and psychological reasons for the abuse of alcohol and other intoxicants. Worldwide there exists a tendency to use alcohol as an excuse for reducing stress, anxiety, depression and similar psychological problems. Even though alcohol and other intoxications adversely

affect the physical and mental health of the user, its complex reaction on each person varies.

Beyond the physical and material benefits behind the argument for an alcohol-free life, as a spiritualist, Guru knew that the use of abusive substances such as alcohol was detrimental to the nourishing of the innate spiritual carvings and *sattvic* nature of people. As alcohol agitates the body as well as the mind, people under its influence become naturally unfit to control, calm and focus their minds. Such people will not be able to experience peace and joy. Their disturbed minds may become a dreadful foe as they face challenging situations in life. So, an alcoholic is doomed to failure regardless of having the unbound potential as a human being. Guru was pained to witness people and communities perishing due to such carelessness. The plight of such individuals who ignore their precious gifts in life for gaining moments of gratification and sensual pleasures will remain a cause of concern to those who care for their fellow human beings.

Supporting the Dalit Cause (1910-24)

Aiding Dalit Struggle for School Entry

The downtrodden masses in the very bottom of Kerala's caste hierarchy were traditionally classified as Pulayas and Parayas. Currently, they are part of the larger Dalit community. For generations, they had been living like slaves. They were forced to work in the agricultural fields of higher castes from dawn to night without adequate food or wages. They were denied almost all basic civil liberties including the right to walk freely on public roads, wearing adequate and decent clothes as well as the right to formal education.

If anybody among them dared to speak against the system, they faced drastic and merciless consequences. Any attempt to wreak the caste laws was not tolerated by the royal rulers. Even the British seldom interfered in the local caste rules for fear of alienating the ruling class.

Sree Narayana Guru believed education to be the most preferable solution to save them from the dark pits of ignorance. In the *ashrams* established by Guru, many Dalit children were adopted as inmates and given all support and guidance to become knowledgeable individuals. This was a historic initiative during a time of caste segregation, bigotry and superstition.

The awakening initiated by Guru set the stage for many movements for human rights among the traditionally deprived masses. The atmosphere paved the way for the rise of many revolutionary leaders among the lower castes including Ayyan Kali, the famous Dalit leader of Travancore. Under Ayyan Kali's able leadership, an organization was formed in 1907 for the upliftment of the neglected group of working class communities. Ayyan Kali, bravely led "Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham" or "Organization for serving the poor" and won many long-denied rights for the *Dalit* communities. As they challenged the authorities and the existing systems, occasional uprisings took place in various parts of Travancore. Whenever the untouchable communities struggled to obtain their basic privileges as human beings through peaceful and just means, Guru wholeheartedly supported their efforts.

Even though Ayyan Kali was best remembered in Travancore for his courageous agitations for establishing the right to travel on public roads, the struggles he endured on acquiring the rights of education to the community of Dalits remained a remarkable achievement. Because of many petitions for the right to school entry, the Travancore government half-heartedly issued an order permitting Dalit students in schools in 1907. Since all levels of the administration were controlled then by the upper castes, the hesitating officials cunningly stayed away from acting upon the order. Many local schools were run by upper caste landlords. They did not pay heed to the continuous requests of the Dalits for entry into schools.

After numerous attempts, Ayyan Kali initiated a novel method. He called for a complete boycott of all farm workers from the agricultural fields of upper castes. As they challenged the hierarchy in the form of a massive strike, a rare strategy in those days, the poor workers had to face severe hardships and intimidations. But they stood their ground until an acceptable compromise was offered to them. The Dalits were

promised the right to walk freely on public roads as well as entry into schools. The royal government finally released the landmark order permitting Dalits in schools in 1910 after some pressure and persuasion from the British authorities. Unfortunately, the road to schools were still not free from hurdles.

As Ayyan Kali along with a few followers reached a school at Oorootambalam in the southern region of Travancore with Panchami, a five-year old Dalit girl, for admission, they had to confront a group of armed thugs at the entrance. Fighting erupted. Soon riots broke out in various parts of Travancore between Dalits and upper castes. Unfortunately, a few local members of the untouchable community of Ezhavas also joined the upper castes in fighting the Dalit Pulayas.

Guru was awfully pained when he came to know about the riots and the despicable role of some Ezhavas. He was very much comforted as he heard that the majority of the Ezhavas in the region provided moral and material support to the Dalits in their just struggle. Guru personally met and appreciated them. Later Guru and Ayyan Kali met for the first time at the residence of a prominent devotee. Even though Ayyan Kali was treading a different path than Guru for attaining freedom and social justice, the foremost leader of Dalits was captivated and humbled by the kindness, warmth and care of the supreme spiritual personality of his time. Whenever in need of advice, Ayyan Kali happily visited and consulted Guru.

The owner of the Oorootambalam School was an upper caste man and he wanted to prevent Dalit students from entering the school. As a permanent solution to the problem, he set the building on fire. Soon the government formulated a plan to support segregated single-teacher schools for teaching Dalits. Even that modest attempt was not tolerated by the ultra-conservative and superstitious orthodoxy. Many such schools were destroyed several times. Ayyan Kali and his people had to rebuild them.

A Heartfelt Message to the Downtrodden

Since the early days of his missionary activities, the empowerment of Dalits had been one of the major goals of Guru. Like Sree Buddha, Sree Narayana Guru also condemned the concept of caste in the most

severe terms and dedicated his life to awaken the people against its unjust and destructive influence. Both believed that the values of morality and ethics, rather than birth, to be the basis in defining a person's individuality. Like the plights of the Negroes of the American South before the Emancipation Proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, the Pulaya communities of Travancore endured horrible social oppression at the hands of the traditionally privileged communities.

Guru not only actively encouraged but sought out the entry of Dalits to temples, educational institutions and monasteries established by him. Even though the larger society at the dawn of the 20th century in Kerala was largely opposed to granting basic human rights and privileges as human beings to millions of Dalits, Guru and his various movements were exceptions. Thus, in the Sivagiri and Aluva ashrams established by Guru, many Dalits received not only basic education but also lessons in the elite language of Sanskrit.

As soon as Guru erected a humble hut as his dwelling in Sivagiri, he opened many night schools in the neighbourhood for the benefit of the illiterate Dalits. One of the first such night schools was started in Kallumalakunnu near Vettoor, around four miles away from the Sivagiri ashram. Wherever Guru travelled as part of his missionary work, priority was given to educating Dalit children.

A night school for the exclusive benefit of Pulayas was established by Dr Palpu, one of Guru's close associates, in Thiruvananthapuram in 1904. The old issues of journals such as *Viveakodayam* and *Mitavadi* (two popular journals in the early 20th century in Kerala) are replete with the reports of the missionary activities of Sree Narayana Guru and his associates among the Dalit communities.

From early on Guru advocated education as the key to uplift the Dalit communities. The issue of Dalit uplift was a topic of discussion in many of the early annual meetings of the S.N.D.P. Yogam after its formation in 1903. Kumaran Asan as chief editor of *Viveakodayam*, the mouthpiece of S.N.D.P. Yogam, continuously fought for the rights of the Dalit communities, especially on the issue of public school admission. Also, it was Kumaran Asan who vehemently argued for the eventual nomination of Ayyan Kali as a member of Praja Sabha, the legislative Assembly of the royal kingdom.

A major meeting of Pulayas, a prominent Dalit community, took place in 1920 near Thiruvananthapuram. Sree Narayana Guru was invited to preside over the function. Guru made an unusually lengthy speech on the occasion. His words were filled with love and compassion towards those people who were victims of centuries of mistreatment.

Guru said: "The whole human race is a single caste. Among them exists only status differences and no caste distinctions. Nothing can contradict this fact. Some people may possess more money, education and have better habits of cleanliness while some others lag in those. There can be differences in skin colour too. Beyond these peripheral differences, human race has no difference that can be characterized as caste. The Pulayas as a community now faces extreme deficiencies in money and education. Attempts shall be made to acquire such resources. Education shall be given priority. Once you achieve that, money and cleanliness would follow. It is a misleading assumption that you lack money. In fact, you are money! There are none among you who do not make money from your daily toil. Unfortunately, the fruits of your labour are now going down the drain due to undesirable habits such as alcoholism. If you can collectively save a portion of your earnings, that can be used to educate aspiring students from your community. Make plans to meet monthly at one convenient place for discussing issues of common interest and to make appropriate decisions. Try your best to refrain from the use of alcohol. Don't allow your younger generation to follow such harmful practices. The older generation also shall strive to abandon the use of alcohol. Whenever you assemble, make the goal of an alcohol-free community a priority. I am sure of the support of others also in your endeavour. I hope to see all of you frequently in the future."

Adoption of Dalit Children

Many deprived children benefited from Sree Narayana Guru's charitable endeavours, and one among them was A. Kunjuraman. He hailed from a poor Dalit family near the Sivagiri Ashram. It was because of Guru's initiatives, he got the opportunity to enter a new chapter in his life. Against all odds, Kunjuraman rose to the position as the Mayor of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala's capital city.

Kunjuraman was one among the first five Dalit boys who were taken to the Ashram by Kumaran Asan and his colleague M. Govindan on Guru's directives for adoption in the Ashram. The incident took place in 1920. Until then the boys had led an ignorant life grazing cattle and playing in the fields without having an opportunity to learn. They knew no discipline and had no notion of hygiene. Before presenting them in front of Guru, first they were given a nice bath and then were given fresh clothes. Unfortunately, some of the inmates of the Ashram were originally hesitant to accommodate the boys in the Ashram because of their caste.

One of Guru's biographers, G. Priyadarsanan, details many historical facts on his life. It provides valuable information regarding the early life of those Dalit inmates in the Sivagiri Ashram. Even though Guru was hurt because of the attitudes of the ashram inmates, he kept a reserved silence. Open confrontation was never Guru's style. So, those boys were given shelter in a nearby cowshed for the time being. But Guru was determined to provide them food as well as education. For the first time in their life, they enjoyed good food and began to experience a disciplined life. Gradually, they were accepted by everybody as inmates of the ashram and became Guru's favourite companions.

Guru then tried to secure them admission in the nearby school. But its head was unwilling to admit them as the "higher castes" opposed the entry of the Dalits to the school. As a result, the school was closed for the next few days. Meanwhile, Guru contacted the higher authorities and forced them to grant admission to those boys. Finally, they were allowed to attend the classes but had to sit on the floor.

Guru taught them Sanskrit as well as many auspicious mantras of the *Upanishads*. Some were also appointed as priests in the Sarada Devi temple at Sivagiri. When Mahatma Gandhi visited the Sivagiri ashram, he got the opportunity to listen to the chanting of the Vedic mantras recited by the Dalit inmates. Gandhi was amazed that the children who uttered the mantras so perfectly were not Brahmins but Dalits. Guru planted in those young minds a new sense of dignity and self-confidence. The astounding proficiency they earned in Sanskrit and in Vedic mantras was a surprise to many. India had never witnessed such things since the time of Ved Vyasa.

14

Sixtieth Birthday (1916)

Felicitations Pour In

According to Indian tradition, the sixtieth birthday has much significance as it is considered as a mile-stone in a person's life. As the occasion is considered very auspicious and has religious connotations, ceremonial rituals usually follow to commemorate the event. Vedic texts consider the full life-span of an individual as 120 years. So, the completion of sixty years marks the first half of the journey. A person is expected to establish the meaning and purpose of life by the time he reaches that age. Moreover, the occasion allows the dear and near ones to commemorate the event as a thanksgiving ceremony to express their gratitude for the contributions of that person to their lives.

Even though every human life on Earth has a divine purpose, certain personalities appear in the world with a specific mission to rescue the society from moral and ethical degradation. Sree Narayana Guru was such a person with a mission to eradicate the growing and dividing walls between human beings of all societies through his vision of universal brotherhood. For the millions of downtrodden in Kerala, Guru's soothing presence in their midst had an immediate and direct effect. By the time Guru completed sixty years of his life, it was a cause of celebration for the whole society. Beyond the barriers of caste and religion, people in all walks of life revered him as a divine being. Commoners as well as royals joined the celebrations.

Guru's *Shashtipurthi* or sixtieth birthday was celebrated across Kerala in September 1916 in villages as well as cities. There was hardly a place in the three regions of Kerala where Guru's birthday was not celebrated. It was also observed in many cities outside the state such as Madras (Chennai), Bombay (Mumbai) and Kolkata (Calcutta). It was also celebrated in Singapore and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). In all places, the event was marked by public meetings, processions and a mass feast.

A commemorative monument was built in Thiruvananthapuram to mark the occasion. It was inaugurated by Divan M. Krishnan Nair, the chief administrator of the kingdom of Travancore. Ulloor S. Parameshwara Iyer, the legendary poet, historian and a royal official of the Travancore kingdom, spoke eloquently on the occasion. Over ten thousand people participated in one feast in Thiruvananthapuram alone. Many libraries and night-schools were opened across Kerala in Guru's name to help the deprived in the society.

Guru preferred to stay away from the pomp and fair. As the celebrations were going on, he was resting in the Aluva Adwaita Ashramam. Devotees gathered there also and decorated the ashram and the vicinity with flowers. Oil lamps and incense were lighted, and the gathering patiently waited for Guru's arrival with prayers for Guru's health and longevity. After having a bath and other daily routines, Guru arrived at the main hall of the ashram and blessed the congregation. Kerala has never seen such a celebration with mass participation and enthusiasm. It was reflective of people's genuine affection towards the sage.

A long list of reputed Malayalam poets paid tributes to Guru by composing poems. They included A.R. Rajaraja Varma of the Travancore Palace, Vallathol Narayana Menon, Kerala Varma of the Pandalam Palace, Divan Bahadur Govinda Pillai, Azakathu Padmanabha Kurup, P.K. Narayana Pillai, M.R. Krishna Warriar, Paravoor Kesavan Asan, Muloor S. Padmanabha Panicker and Pallathu Raman. But the poem written by N. Kumaran Asan, who was well known as Guru's favourite disciple and the foremost voice of modern Malayalam poetry, won the hearts, minds and souls of Guru's devotees all over the world.

A Timeless Birthday Present

Kumaran Asan's *Gurustavam* has been recited daily by millions of Malayalis worldwide with devotion since it was first sung in 1916. It was Kumaran Asan who initiated the revolution in Malayalam poetry, and rescued it to modernity from the long captivity of outdated ideas, styles and mindsets. He was recognized as *Mahakavi* or "great poet" by Madras University in 1922. He was awarded ceremoniously a silk shawl and golden bracelet by the Prince of Wales for his achievements as a poet. Asan was also a member of the royal legislative assembly of Travancore known as *Sree Moolam Praja Sabha*. He was fearless in using the opportunity to seek the long-denied justice and equality for the marginalized sections of population in the kingdom. Even though Kumaran Asan died prematurely at the age of fifty-one, he left a remarkable legacy in the social and literary arena of Kerala.

To Kumaran Asan, Sree Narayana Guru was not just another social or religious reformer. To him, Guru was more than a saint, sage and philosopher. It was Sree Narayana Guru who adopted him as a disciple and guided him as a poet when he was a teenager. For two and a half decades, he was Guru's closest companion, loyal lieutenant and ardent devotee. So, his concept of Guru as "God incarnate" carries significant relevance and value.

Kumaran Asan's *Gurustavam* originally contained seven stanzas. The opening lines began with the salutation of Sree Narayana Guru as *Narayana-moorthea* which exemplifies Asan's vision of Guru as

the embodiment of Adi-Narayana or the Supreme spiritual force of the universe. The Vedic culture proclaims Guru as equivalent to Lord Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the three foremost deities of Vedic religion. In the first stanza, Asan states that Guru is none other than God since devotees are led from delusion to the eternal Truth through the guidance of a true Guru. So, being such a divine light to millions of people, the poet establishes that Sree Narayana Guru is none other than God.

In the second stanza, the poet alludes to the super-human personality of Sree Narayana Guru. Naturally, he casts his doubt on the possibility of finding a figure like Guru. The poet identifies Guru as the perfect embodiment of compassion and wisdom. He doubts whether anyone besides Guru has been able to fully renounce material ego with the same intensity. It is this realization that leads the devotees to prostrate at his holy feet.

Kumaran Asan then reminds us on the ultimate sacrifice of Guru for the service of fellow human beings. Guru is unique among the sanyasins and other holy men as he sacrificed not only his earthly life in its entirety but also the spiritual energy earned through years of rigorous ascetic practices for the benefit of them. In the Indian tradition since ancient times, sage-yogis seldom interact and interfere in the affairs of common people as it would be a struggle for them to safeguard their serenity and mental purity in those circumstances.

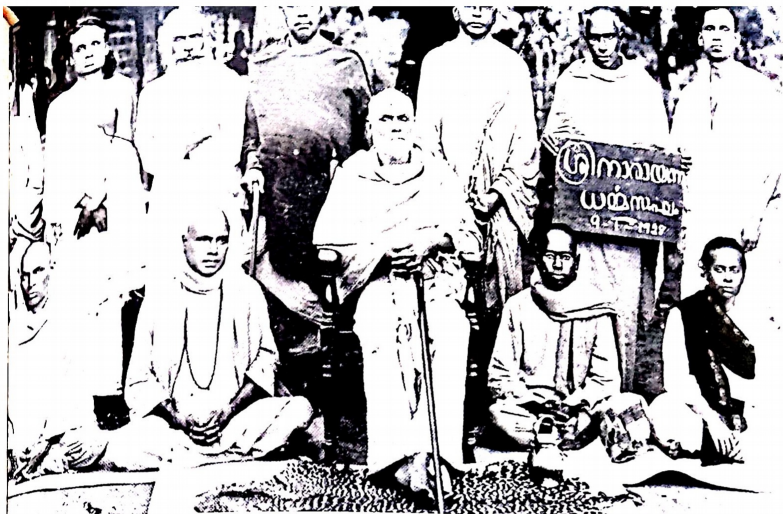
The fourth stanza talks about the *stitha-pranja bhava* of Guru who dwells in the ideal realm of true yogis regardless of the surrounding noises. The poet refers to the religious conflicts that continue to cause havoc among societies. Guru's yogic-impartiality is reflective of his unique state as the "only one who grasped the true meaning of Vedic wisdom."

The poet then acknowledges that as mortal beings our lives are filled with miseries, sorrows and worries. Then he says, "O' Guru! By virtue of your unconditional love, we feel protected as you hold us in an eternal connection." He then thankfully notes that by the merit of Guru's benevolent name alone, a vast humanity finds solace and success.

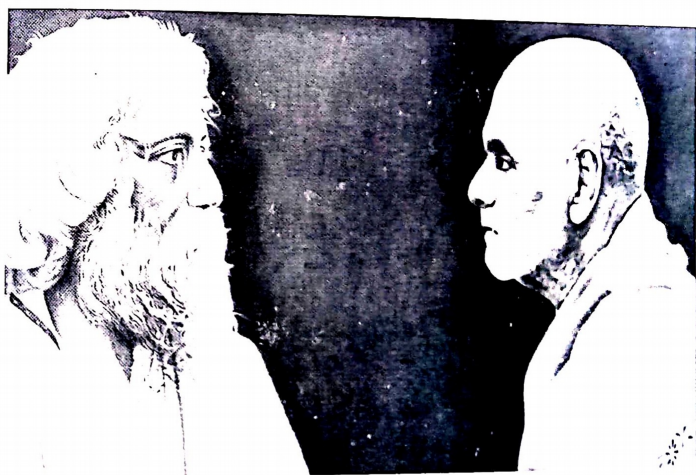
The sixth stanza thanks Guru for his boundless compassion in the form of immense blessings. It is that kindness that enables many to

unite as one happy lot and, in the process, helps themselves to reach their destiny.

The last and the seventh stanza of Asan's *Gurustavam*, as it was composed originally but is not being recited after the mortal departure of Guru, is literally a birthday wish for the continuous well-being of Guru. "O' Guru! You graciously treat even an ant in equal regard. We hold your divine feet as our ultimate solace, and we hope and pray for your eternal presence in our midst."



At the formation of Sree Narayana Dharma Sanghom, the ascetic disciples' organization



Nobel Laureate
Rabindranath Tagore
visits Guru at the
Sivagiri Ashram
(November 22, 1922)



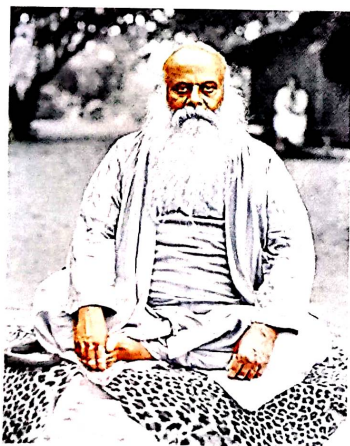
Mahatma Gandhi
visits Guru at the
Sivagiri Ashram
(March 12, 1925)



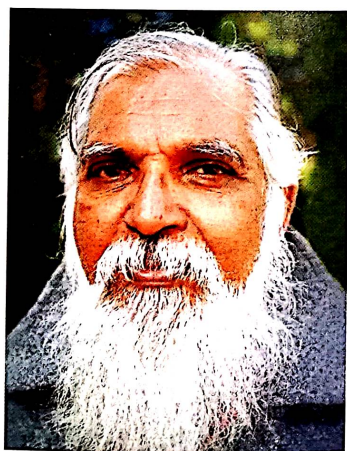
Swami Vivekananda



Raja Ram Mohan Roy
(the father of Indian
renaissance)



Nataraja Guru (direct disciple of
Sree Narayana Guru and author of
many books on Guru's philosophy in
English)



Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati (Disciple
of Nataraja Guru and an exceptional
scholar who dedicated his life
to spread the philosophy of Sree
Narayana Guru around the world).

Beyond Kerala (1916-18)

Visiting Ramana Maharshi

Shree Narayana Guru's disciple Govindananda Swami established an ashram in 1916 in Kancheepuram, located around fifty miles from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. Kancheepuram is home to numerous ancient stone temples, huge in size, built by the Pallava and Chola kings who ruled there from the 4th century onwards.

At a time when cholera spread around the area and killed many during the early 1900s, Govindananda Swami dedicated himself as a missionary to save lives by treating patients with *Ayurvedic* medicines. As a result, many prominent people in the area became supporters of Govindananda Swami. The ashram began to expand. Guru was invited to inaugurate the ashram. After inauguration, a

few *sanyasins* who attended the ceremony suggested that the Guru should visit Thiruvannamalai, the abode of Raraana Maharshi. He proceeded to do that in February 1916.

Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) was revered as a spiritual master and sage who attained enlightenment at an early age. He was considered the personification of renunciation, the most valued trait of a *sanyasi*. He was also an expert on Vedanta. He lived in a humble ashram on the Thiruvannamali hills since age seventeen until his mortal departure. Guru and his followers reached the base of the mountain at morning, took some rest and then slowly climbed the hill to reach the ashram of Ramana Maharshi. On the way, Guru cracked many jokes.

As soon as Maharshi heard through his disciples that Guru was coming to meet him, he got ready to come down from the mountain top to greet the sage from Kerala though he had never left his *ashram* before. But Guru reached the top before Maharshi had the chance to reach him. The two spiritual brothers met each other for the first time. They stood still for a few moments as their eyes conversed. Then Guru abruptly left while the followers who accompanied Guru stayed beside Maharshi. Then they began to recite some of the philosophical poems written by Guru. Maharshi listened to them keenly.

During all this time Guru was sitting alone lost in thought under the shade of a tree, a little away from the *ashram*. After some time, a few of Guru's disciples came to him. Guru asked them, "Did you see him?" When they answered affirmatively, Guru commented: "O' you all saw him but only I didn't, right?" Guru wanted his followers to realize that the greatness of Maharshi's spiritual prowess was beyond material perception. While seating under the tree, Guru was mentally composing a poem describing his reflections on Ramana Maharshi. He narrated those lines to one of his close disciples.

By then, it was noon, and everyone was ready for a feast at the ashram in honour of Guru's visit. At the direction of Ramana Maharshi, a few of his disciples went to Guru and passed the invitation from the Maharshi to join the meal. But Guru was in no mood for the meal. He continued to dictate the words that flowed from his mind so that his disciple could copy it down. Guru said, "I will come a little later."

As Maharshi found out that Guru had not come, he went to Guru personally and invited him for the meal. At once Guru stopped dictating, followed Maharshi, and they sat next to each other and enjoyed the delicious food served on banana leaves. After the meal, Guru again returned to the shade of the tree and rested there until evening.

Before Guru and his disciples left the ashram that evening, the completed poem in Sanskrit was presented to Ramana Maharshi as a special offering. The poem was titled as *Nirvruthi Panchakam*, or "Five Verses of Bliss" which describes the realm of perfect contentment experienced by a true spiritual master. Those words reflect the permanent state of peace and happiness enjoyed by enlightened personalities such as Guru and Maharshi. Each verse identifies the qualities and distinct characteristics of those who have elevated themselves to a higher plateau of spirituality.

According to *Nirvruthi Panchakam*, a person would not have any need of questions on name, place and other material whereabouts about another person as that individual is completely detached from the mundane affairs of common people. Such an individual who is beyond any material bonds, identities, needs and desires reaches *Moksha* or heaven while living. Such enlightened personalities cannot perceive any differences among the creations of God as those rare ones truly experience the oneness of all beings. Only those who are the personifications of *Advaita* or non-duality can attain and remain in such a state of heavenly bliss. Such liberated souls naturally prefer to be in divine silence as far as possible as revealing those mystical secrets may downgrade the intensity of their experience. Guru wanted to acknowledge the spiritual greatness of Ramana Maharshi through those verses. Undoubtedly, those five Sanskrit verses also reveal the blissful state of experience attained by Guru as a great spiritual personality.

Later Ramana Maharshi exclaimed that Guru was a great sage. As Maharshi got the opportunity to hear some of the verses from Guru's *Athmopadesha Satakam* which dwells on philosophical matters, he reaffirmed that Guru knew everything. When Guru was nearing Mahasamadhi, Ramana Maharshi graciously sent a few of his close disciples to serve and attend to Guru in his last days. When Ramana

Maharshi was ill, *ayurvedic* medicines prepared at the Kancheepuram ashram by Guru's disciples were sent for treating Maharshi.

A Visit to Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka was not only one of the favourite destinations of Sree Narayana Guru but he had special affection towards the island nation in the Indian Ocean. He liked the people of the island and their simplicity. Sri Lanka has had a long history with India. The shortest distance between the two nations is around twenty-two miles from Dhanushkodi in Tamil Nadu to Thalaimannar in Sri Lanka. When Guru visited the country, it was known as Ceylon.

Since ancient times, Sri Lanka was in the imagination of Indians. The epic *Ramayana* depicts Sri Lanka as a superbly wealthy and powerful kingdom of great fame. As per *Ramayana*, the kingdom was ruled by the king Ravana before it lost its ancient glory. According to legend, Ravana was a man of many contradictions as he possessed many virtues as well as fatal shortcomings which paved the way for his untimely death at the hands of Lord Rama. According to legend, a bridge was constructed by Rama and his devotees between Dhanushkodi and Sri Lanka for them to reach the abode of Ravana. The remnants of an ancient land bridge, popularly known as *Rama Sethu*, still exist in the Indian Ocean between the two nations.

The Indian influence reached its peak by the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in 250 BCE. The new religion was spread in the island by Mahindra, the son of the Indian emperor Ashoka. Sri Lanka was instrumental in spreading Buddhism in many nations of Southeast Asia as well as in Kerala as Buddhist missionaries took the message of Buddha to distant lands.

Kerala has many common features with Sri Lanka including geography and weather. Both lands are suitable for growing similar plants, crops and spices. The coconut plantations, palm groves, paddy fields, pepper, cinnamon, ginger and turmeric reflect Sri Lanka's shared characteristics with Kerala. Some historians and researchers point out that the forefathers of Ezhavas immigrated from Sri Lanka and they share a Buddhist heritage.

Guru visited Sri Lanka twice in 1918 and 1926. In 1918, his

disciples Satyavrata Swami and Bodhananda Swami and a few other devotees, accompanied Guru. As they were preparing for the journey, his sanyasin disciples urged Guru to wear saffron robes, the traditional attire of the sanyasins. They wanted strangers to distinguish Guru easily from others in the group when they land in that unfamiliar place. Even though Guru was not enthusiastic about the suggestion, he finally gave in as disciples persisted. Until then Guru would wear only plain white robes.

In the Indian tradition of sanyasin succession, it is the obligation of the guru figure to formally hand over the saffron robes to the ordained disciple. Unlike the sanyasins of the Indian tradition, Guru is not known to have joined any existing sanyasin order. Also, Guru never indicated that he was ordained into sanyasa by anyone. Anyway, his disciples handed over the robes to Guru and he accepted it graciously. In the Indian tradition, it was the first and the last time a guru formally took saffron robes from a disciple. Since that occasion in 1918, Guru was seen clad in saffron robes.

The ship carrying Guru and his disciples left Rameshwaram on September 24, 1918. After reaching Thalimannar, they continued their journey by train to Columbo, its main city. The people of Sri Lanka heartily welcomed Guru with a huge procession as he reached the island. As Guru arrived at the railway station, a vast gathering received him. Even though many in Sri Lanka were seeing Guru for the first time, his name and fame had already reached the island. When his 60th birthday was celebrated in Kerala in 1916, functions were held in Colombo too.

According to a news report of October 5, 1918, more than one thousand people including Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians participated in a procession welcoming Guru to the island. A beautiful mansion was arranged in Cinnamon Garden for Guru's stay. The whole area was nicely decorated. Guru visited many ancient Hindu temples and Buddhist *Viharas* across the island and conducted many prayer meetings. He also attended public functions in his honour. Natives, Europeans, Tamils, as well as Malayalees were among the large number of people who came to the abode of Guru seeking blessings and advice. Many regarded his visit as the second coming of Lord Buddha.

During his stay in Sri Lanka, Guru engaged in philosophical discussions with Buddhist scholars. One such occasion was notable due to the topic of the discussion as well as Guru's responses. A Buddhist monk invited Guru to his monastery for a courteous engagement. The monk was amazed by the spiritual energy emanating from Guru's face.

During their conversation, Guru asked the Buddhist monk, "What is the reason for taking birth?"

"Karma causes birth and rebirth," the monk responded. What he meant was that an individual's actions in the past life were responsible for that person's present birth in a certain situation.

Guru again enquired, "If then what causes birth in the beginning?"

The Monk had no answer. After a few minutes of silence, he said, "This is a very hard question."

To this, Guru stated, "Our assumptions on birth and rebirth are matters of faith. Unlike material and physical concepts, logic has limited place in spirituality. An individual's spiritual convictions are beyond the measures of reason. Truths on spirituality have to be realized through individual experiences. Otherwise, religion and its rituals become meaningless."

Even though Guru was moved by the affection of the people of Sri Lanka, he was also saddened by their struggles. Men mostly worked as labourers for low wages as many of them had no formal education. He was further disturbed by the lack of unity among the communities. Guru deputed his efficient disciple Satyavrata Swami with the task of improving the unity and wellbeing among them. After twelve days, Guru left Sri Lanka with his disciples except Saty vratha on October 7, 1918. With Guru's active directions, numerous night schools, libraries and other institutions were established in the island by Satyavratha Swami, for the benefit of the poor and the depressed in Sri Lanka.

Against Caste (1916)

Poems Defining Caste

Guru compiled three short poems, defining his views on caste. Those poems, *Jathi Nimayam*, *Jathi Meemamsa* and *Jathi Lakshanam* stand as his declarations on caste in unequivocal terms.

In the modern history of India, it was Sree Narayana Guru who first declared that the social institution known as *jathi* or caste was artificial, unreal and meaningless. Rather than plainly expressing his opinions on the need to eradicate the evils of the *jathi* system, Guru objectively provided convincing biological reasons to prove his claim that all human beings belonged to a single race.

The "*Jathi Nimayam*" *Jathi Meemamsa* and *Jathi Lakshanam* stand as masterful evidence of his indisputable scientific revelations

on human genealogy. Guru cited factual evidences from Nature on different species, and compared and contrasted the basic biological attributes of each being in support of his theory on the oneness of human race. For skeptics, he quotes examples from the ancient religious history and from the *Upanishad* traditions to prove the illegitimacy of caste.

In *Jathi Nimayam*, Guru defines human beings as one race. The first verse was written in Sanskrit with an intended purpose. All the traditional edicts that established the legitimacy of caste had been written in Sanskrit. Sanskrit has been basically confined as the exclusive language of a prestigious few. The common masses were not only prevented from learning the language but were banned from hearing its readings. Thus, the language earned an aura of sacredness and prestige, and anything said in Sanskrit was automatically received with a superior level of credibility by its elite users as well as by the ignorant masses. If caste became a rule of law because of its Sanskrit connection, Guru wanted to reject it with an equivalent authenticity by defining his take on it also in Sanskrit.

In the first line, Guru defines human beings as a single race distinct from other biological species by stating that "*Manushyanam Manushyathwam*." In the second line, Guru elaborates the definition by adding that "*Jaathir Gothwam Gavaam Yatha*." Together those lines mean that if human beings are to be considered as a race or caste, it should be based on the natural traits common to all human beings, characterized as *manushyatwam*.

This characterization shall be similar to the role of distinct features in identifying a bull or a cow as a class from other species. If caste has any applicability, that should be also based on similar criteria. So, Guru implies that there can't be further classifications among human beings and all man-made caste distinctions have no validity. By stating "*Na Brahmaanathi Rasyavam*", Guru stresses the oneness of humanity and rejects all artificial distinctions such as *Brahmana* and *Sudra*. Guru then laments, "What a pity! Nobody realizes the underlying truth!" Guru's expression that "*Haa! Thatwam Vethi Ko-Api-Na*" is a heartfelt condemnation of the ignorant behaviour that discriminates people based on illusionary measures such as caste, creed, ethnicity and race.

Guru then confirms the commonality of human race by composing the following lines which have been celebrated as one of the most famous words ever uttered by him:

*"Oru Jathi-Oru Matham-Oru Daivam-Manushyanu
Oru Yoni- Orakaaram- Oru Bhethavum- Illathil."*

"The human race is one in kind, one in faith, and one in God
They take birth through the same biological process,
In physical features as well, not at all any notable difference."

Guru elaborates his assertions on the single-race theory with additional evidence. He says that as all infants are born similarly from the womb of their mothers, the human race has to be a single one. The so-called *Brahmin* as well as a person of a despised *Jathi* is born the same way. Hence, what difference exists between them? Guru invokes that a *Dalit* woman gave birth to sage Parasara, one of the most senior holy men of ancient India. Sage Vyasa, the fatherly figure of India's ancient Vedic religion, was born from another woman of similar *Dalit* background. If then, caste or *jat*Ai-wise, there can't be any difference among the human race. Guru thus asserts that only individual-based differences of limited nature exist among humans at peripheral planes such as character, skin color, height, weight and so on.

In *Jathi Lakshanam*, the approach is more specific, systematic and scientific as far as the justifications for the single-race theory are concerned. Guru cites cues from Nature to convince the futility of caste. As the universe has numerous kinds of species ranging from humans to a diverse plethora of beings such as animals, birds, reptiles, ants, plants and other microscopic creatures, Guru defines species based on the fundamental biological aspect of regeneration. He says that one kind of living being can be qualified as a single species, if it has the capacity to generate the same kind through natural process. So, the ones that fail to regenerate the same kind are not considered as the same race, kind or species. Guru then states that each kind of species is often seen in male and female pairs such as man and women, cow and bull, cock and hen.

Further, according to *Jathi Lakshanam*, each kind of species differs from the other in a number of ways. The most notable difference is in physical structure. Then, sound, smell, taste, temperature are different for each species. In addition, each has its own distinct identifications that readily distinguish its kind. So, it is not at all difficult for us to recognize one kind of species from another when we come across such a group.

So, Guru advises us that when we encounter another human being, the acceptable mode of inquiry may consist of only name, place and profession. We shall refrain from inquiring further as the exercise is meaningless since the proof of identity is evident from the body itself. In this regard, subjective and assumed attributes have no standing. Guru warns that a person of minimum intelligence shall not indulge in making inquiries on race-caste identity. Any categorization vis-a-vis race-caste is not only demeaning but the attempt is also deceptive.

“Caste Has No Meaning: My Loyalty is to Humanity”

Sree Narayana Guru always maintained that caste was a meaningless criterion in classifying people. On many occasions, Guru declared his strong disapproval of any attempt to confine him to a specific caste or religion. Unlike other socio-political and religious leaders of the 20th century, eradicating not just caste inequalities but caste itself was one of the main life missions of Guru.

In conversations, casual as well as formal, Guru adamantly stood against the idea of caste. On religion also, Guru's views were uniquely different from most of the traditional religious reformers and philosophers. He never advocated the exclusive authority of any religion. According to his view, religions are transformative paths for leading humans towards righteousness. As such, every religion is equally good if it is understood and followed in its true sense. Guru genuinely embodied the essence of "unity in diversity," the philosophical doctrine proclaimed by the *rishis* of ancient India.

Unfortunately, while Guru was alive and active in society, he had to undergo the crude realities of caste in public as well as private life

as caste was the most important feature of social life in Kerala. While Guru remained in the realm of a global citizen and a universal being, ignorant people continued to regard him in the context of caste. We could imagine how uncomfortable such situations were.

Caste as an institution was not only acknowledged but strictly regulated and implemented through many legal edicts. Thus an individual's life, behaviour and actions were tied by the rigid rules of caste. In Travancore, the royal kingdom considered that it was its divine duty to maintain society in such a way for eternity. As a result, severe punishments were meted out to anyone who dared to question the system. The British government preferred a hands-off approach on the caste system as much as possible. So, caste was a tag every individual had to carry for life.

A message issued by Sree Narayana Guru on May 28, 1916, a century ago, deserves to be analysed to grasp his real greatness. Even though the message was seemingly simple, the impact of those words on the socio-cultural scene of Kerala was monumental. Its reverberations can be felt to this day. Guru was staying at the Advaita-Ashram founded by him in Aluva. The following is the author's translation of that message published originally in *Prabhudda Keralam*, a prominent magazine, in June 1916.

"Years have passed since I relinquished all differentiations based on caste and religion. Yet certain specific groups continue to regard me as one among them. Due to their behaviour and actions based on such notions, there have occurred some misconceptions about the truth in the minds of some people.

I do not belong to any specific caste or religion. I have so far accepted as disciples in Aluva Adwaita-Ashram, who may survive as my successors, only those who qualify that criterion. I have ensured that the same benchmark shall be followed when admitting new ones to the group in the future as well. To the knowledge of the public, I wish to publish this statement." The message was signed by Guru with the date in the Malayalam Era.

Guru spoke at another event two months later. The avenue was a private gathering on the outskirts of Kollam, a coastal city. Guru was invited to bless the occasion of a housewarming ceremony of one of

his close devotees. The homeowner also happened to be a generous supporter of Guru's social services. A large number of followers as well as many community stalwarts including Kumaran Asan, T.K. Madhavan and C.V. Kunjuraman were in presence. Like Achuthan Mastry, the host, they all felt blessed to share precious moments in the company of Guru. To the surprise of everyone, T.K. Madhavan, the young and energetic leader of the Ezhava community, approached Guru and made a rare request: "Swami, could you kindly state your philosophical position on religion as it would help us to clear any confusion." With a gentle smile, Guru nodded.

Guru began to speak in a soft voice. Guru was not known to be a public speaker. As much as possible, he refrained from preaching in private as well as in public. On many occasions, Guru delegated his trusted lieutenants to speak on his behalf. But Guru never shied away from speaking his mind in unequivocal terms even in the most challenging situations if the occasion warranted such an intervention. As a master conversationalist, Guru was well versed in the art of turning every such moment into an opportunity to educate and empower the people around him.

So, Guru revealed his mind: "The artificial caste divisions that exist today are not only meaningless but have detrimental consequences. Such distinctions have to be eradicated. Feelings such as '*I am upper caste*' and '*I am lower caste*,' also need to go. I have been free from such feelings for a long time. It is wrong to contemplate the affairs of a community in terms of religion and vice versa. Community matters and religion shall have no connection at all. Religion is a matter of mind. There shall be no interference in anybody's religious freedom. People have distinct natures. Depending upon each one's state of mind and range of development, differences are bound to exist. A single religion that is acceptable to all categories of people seems to be a hard reality. Nobody shall say that '*my religion is truth and the rest are false*.' All religions possess Truth. They all came into being for good intentions as well.

I have no special affiliation to any religion that exists today. I have not established any religion either. All religions agree with my convictions. Each person may observe the religion of his/her choice. The reason I consecrated a few temples was to satisfy the wish of

certain Hindus. Similarly, if people belong to any religion including Christians or Muslims wish, I am only happy to do such things for them as well. The statement of mine renouncing caste as well as religion only meant that I have no specific affection to any caste or religion."

These words of Guru were so direct and powerful that it deeply moved everyone who happened to listen to him.

Unfortunately, the society is yet to internalize Guru's notion on caste even in this global age. Even though Guru rejected the concept of caste a century ago, an overwhelming majority of people from all regions of India still consider caste as real. They also attempt to perpetuate the institution of caste at any cost. Many people still view their caste tag as a status symbol or identity regardless of modern education. Even after seventy years of independence, India as a liberal and democratic nation has not been able to bring a systematic change in the minds of its citizens concerning this primitive institution. Pitifully, among the Indian diaspora living in various countries in other continents for many decades, the grip of caste shows no sign of receding.

A Train Journey

People from across Kerala and neighbouring states always wanted Guru's divine presence in their areas. They had a wide range of motives for inviting Guru to their respective villages and towns. Some people wanted to initiate changes in their communities while some others hoped to hear worthy advice from the sage. Some wanted Guru to inaugurate new temples or schools that they had built.

Guru had numerous staunch and influential followers in almost all regions of Kerala. Inspired by Guru, they led various initiatives for uplifting communities across the region. Moorkoth Kumaran, a prominent writer and intellectual, was one among them in north Kerala. Mithavadi C. Krishnan was another intellectual and activist from the same region who earned the trust of Guru. In mid-Kerala, Sarasa Kavi Mooloor, an influential leader and a great poet of exemplary talents, was involved in many activities to help local community.

√ In the Travancore area, Guru had Dr Palpu and C.V. Kunjuraman.

Dr Palpu was a philanthropist and activist while Kunjuraman was a pioneer journalist and a rational thinker. There was also Alummoovil Channar, member of an aristocratic family in the Alappuzha region, and Sahodaran Ayyappan, a liberal and progressive community activist based in the Kochi area. Accommodating their needs and wishes, Guru travelled a great distance by land and water via various means of transportation.

On one such occasion, Guru was traveling through mid-Kerala by train along with a few devotees. They naturally engaged in casual conversation on a range of topics. To the accompanying devotees, it was a golden opportunity to solicit Guru's words of wisdom. While they were engaging in such a discussion, two men who were in the same compartment were silently listening to their interesting exchanges. They were amazed by the wisdom of the "special person" and were "convinced" of his noble origins. Guru's physical features and the magnanimity of his appearance were also assuring to them in drawing their conclusions. One among them was a local king and the other, a Brahmin, who appeared to be his advisor or close friend. They were curious to know about this "special person".

The king began the inquiry. "What is your name?"

"Narayanan", Guru replied in a calm voice.

The questioner was not satisfied. His real motive was to know Guru's caste. Usually, people of higher caste announced their caste as part of their name. The stranger was confused as he failed to grasp the piece of information he sought from Guru's response.

So, he asked again, "What is your caste?"

Guru responded, "Why can't you see?"

The strangers were confused by the crisp response. They failed to follow Guru's logic. It was the first time in their lives that someone had told them that caste was to be recognized by sight.

Expressing their helplessness, the king responded, "How can we recognize the caste by just seeing?"

Then came the masterstroke of Guru, "If you can't recognize by seeing, how will you know by hearing?"

Perplexed, the fellows gazed at each other and then fell silent.

Guru was implying that, as far as caste was concerned, the knowledge gained by the faculty of seeing should supersede

the information appropriated through hearing. If that was not happening, then there was an inherent mistake in the understanding of caste. To Sree Narayana Guru, the concept of caste was not only meaningless, bogus, irrational and un-scientific but self-demeaning too. Guru maintained that the human species belonged to only one caste or one race. All other artificial and superficial descriptions were unscientific.

Guru's Response on Caste Conundrum

Sree Narayana Guru was born in an Ezhava family and he was also involved among the Ezhavas for the most part of his life. The Ezhavas as a community consider Guru as their saviour and patron saint. So, many independent-minded people would be inclined to sense a paradox associated with the theoretical proclamations and philosophy of Guru with the existing practical realities. Even though the issue is still relevant, such a feeling was expressed in the form of a question years ago while Guru was alive.

While Guru was taking rest by the shade of a tree in Sivagiri, an upper caste admirer approached him and raised a critical question. The visitor had a lengthy discussion with Guru. Afterwards, he came up with the most enthralling query: "Guru! You have no caste. Then why are you working just among the Ezhavas?"

Guru was widely acknowledged as a sage who came with a mission to eradicate the system of caste. To him, humanity belongs to a single race or caste, and every other distinction among them is artificial and man-made. Guru found that the ultimate solution to eradicate caste was through dispelling ignorance from the minds of individuals and awakening them to a higher state of knowledge and wisdom. Such an expansion of mind would further lead people to a genuine feeling of equality and justice. Only then would the world be free from divisive thoughts. The Advaita philosophy reinvigorated by Sree Narayana Guru was rooted in this notion of humanity. As Guru was a practical *vedantin* and not just a proponent of theoretical verbatim, he had to work within the existing system of his time to change it.

Guru responded to the visitor: "If we take the caste system of Kerala as a drum, Ezhavas are placed in its middle. At the right side,

we could see the array of traditionally privileged groups of people while at the left the downtrodden lot. While those at the right are advanced in education, culture, the unfortunate ones at the left are immersed in darkness and ignorance. Structurally, by reforming Ezhavas, it is possible to pull those from each end towards the middle." After hearing Guru's convincing logic, the man became convinced of Guru's true motive.

Beyond Religion, Towards Humanism

An Ashram to Proclaim “Oneness” of Humanity

Shree Narayana Guru had special fondness for hills, river banks and seashores. Many of Guru's ashrams and temples are also centers of natural beauty. Somehow, he happened to visit Aluva, a place near Kochi in mid-Kerala, and he identified a wide stretch of land at a serene location near the shore of the Periyar, the most prominent river in Kerala. Soon after the consecration of the Sarada Devi temple in Sivagiri, Guru embarked on a long journey to solicit funds for acquiring the land for the new ashram. With the liberal help of staunch devotees, Guru was miraculously able to raise the necessary funds in a matter of days.

Soon after acquiring the land, a humble dwelling was built there in 1914 as a monastery or ashram for Guru and his disciples to stay together. Guru named the facility Advaita Ashram, and he envisioned it as a model centre of learning. It was a conscious effort by Guru to transform the curious minds. There Guru started a unique Sanskrit school as well as a hostel for children. For the first time in India's history, Guru admitted students from all backgrounds regardless of religion or caste for studying Sanskrit. A few Christians, Muslims as well as some Dalits sat together with students from a host of other communities to learn the language. For millennium, only Brahmins had the right to learn Sanskrit. There were harsh punishments against breaking this rule.

The Advaita Ashramam was not conceived as a temple with idols and rituals. People came there not to worship but to pray and meditate. Instead of rituals, Guru advised people to recite meaningful hymns or listen to educational talks on spirituality and philosophy. While staying at the Advaita Ashram, Guru conducted a series of talks on advaita to make the people aware of its relevance and implications. Scholars were invited to participate in various discussions.

Even though the great philosopher Adi Sankaracharya, who lived during the early 8th century, introduced Advaita as a philosophical theory, it was largely confined as an elite concept for intellectual discourse. It was Guru who reinvigorated and revitalized the *advaita* philosophy after centuries of manipulation, contamination and utter neglect. Guru transformed the basic ideals of advaita to include in it the realities of life by giving a human touch to it. Guru's famous dictum "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Humankind" epitomizes this revitalized advaita philosophy.

In many parts of Kerala similar ashrams were formed to promote the ancient philosophy in the modern context. Guru's words and actions exemplified the vitality of the advaita doctrine. Guru viewed the doctrine of advaita as a unique medicine to cure the many ills confronting the society. By propagating the philosophy of Advaita, Guru wanted to proclaim that all beings are nothing but the manifestations of the Absolute Reality known as Brahman. In practical terms, Guru's advaita further meant that no matter the

superficial differences, all human beings are connected. "We are all one big family", that was the underlying message of his advaita.

Supporting a Rational Humanist

Kailash Satyarthi, the child rights activist who won the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize along with Malala Yousfzai of Pakistan, revealed how his experience with caste had a life-changing effect on him. Kailash Sharma (his original name) was fifteen years old when the birth centenary of Mahatma Gandhi was celebrated in 1969. The young Kailash wanted to make the event memorable by celebrating it with members of the local "untouchable" community. As a Brahmin, he aspired to set an example of progressiveness in his rural neighbourhood of Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh. He was inspired by appeals against the many evils of the caste system.

Young and progressive Kailash took the message to heart and wanted to confront caste head-on. He decided to have a mass dinner inviting a few "lower caste Hindus" and some local "upper caste" leaders. The leaders who spoke eloquently in public against caste were all invited. On the evening of the dinner, the invited members from the Dalit community arrived early and helped in preparing the food. Then they waited for others to come. Even though they waited for more than an hour, nobody turned up. To remind his "upper caste" neighbours about the scheduled dinner, Kailash cycled to their homes. To his dismay, none of them seemed interested in having a meal with the Dalits.

Not only did they turn down his invitation, but they threatened to boycott his family as a social punishment for the "misadventure". Kailash was aghast at their hypocritical attitude. The determined Kailash Sharma returned home, had dinner with the Dalit friends and decided something drastic. He discarded his surname *Sharma* which was indicative of his Brahmin caste status and replaced it with *Satyarthi* which simply meant "a seeker of truth". Then onwards he came to be known as Kailash Satyarthi.

The story explains the lingering grip of caste on individuals and communities across the vast land of India. Satyarthi's experience showed how difficult it was to hold a mass dinner together with "high

caste Hindus" and Dalits even in 1969. This reality would explain the significance of a similar act that took place in the caste-ridden corridors of Kerala five decades earlier.

On May 29, 1917, a young man, K. Ayyappan (August 21, 1889-March 6, 1968), nicknamed as *Sahodaran*, a favourite disciple of Guru, organized a *misra-bhojanam* or "community dining" in his village Cherai in Kochi area.

Ayyappan's move was partly contributed by the hypocritical attitude of his fellow Ezhavas towards other "inferior" groups in the caste hierarchy. Ezhavas had been facing humiliating caste-apartheid in the form of untouchability at the hands of "upper castes". Ironically, the same Ezhavas never thought twice about the self-deluding double standard of treating their Pulaya brethren in the same way.

Young Ayyappan, inspired by the humanistic ideals of Sree Narayana Guru, decided to provoke those Ezhava chieftains as well as other believers of the caste hierarchy. The invitees to the feast included a few Dalits, locally known as *Pulayas*, some Ezhavas as well as a few members of the "higher" castes who subscribed to his revolutionary notions.

The orthodox elements among the community were furious. They tried their best to harass and ostracize Ayyappan. Wishing to disgrace him, they mocked him as Pulayan-Ayyappan. Ayyappan was unmoved. The detractors took a different approach, and they tried to demoralize him. They alleged falsely that Guru was against him. He decided to seek Guru's assurance and advice.

Guru backed him: "Be brave. Don't be afraid. You're engaged in a great effort. It will only grow in form and scope. Always remember to uphold the virtues of forgiveness. Pardon those ignorant ones who cause you trouble, Be like Christ."

On Ayyappan's request, Guru issued a historic declaration written in his own handwriting that exemplified his philosophy of humanism. It read: "Humans are basically one race. Their religion, appearance or language may be different from one another but that does not matter in the greater scheme of things. As such, there is nothing unusual in building a marital relationship between them or having a meal together." Guru graciously signed the document, "*Narayana Guru*".

Guru had many disciples across Kerala who led their lives as family men but remained true to the ideals propagated by him. They neither renounced material comforts nor became ascetics but made significant impact in society. K. Ayyappan from Cherai in the Vypin island of Kochi was one such reform-minded young man. He met Guru in 1916.

The island of Vypin, where Cherai is located, was believed to be formed due to a big flood that occurred in the middle of the 14th century. Its strategic location has attracted many foreigners. Over seven hundred years of history, many colonial powers held it. The Portuguese built the first fort in Vypin in 1503. In 1577, a theological seminary as well as a printing press, believed to be the first such facility in Kerala, also became part of the landmarks of Vypin.

Followed by the Portuguese, the Dutch came to Vypin in 1661. The Dutch were defeated in 1795 by the British, and the island was under their control until 1947. Thus, the island underwent cultural and religious fusion because of the continuous flow of foreigners. Even though the foreign institutions introduced modern education, the traditionally privileged groups were its main beneficiaries. The "untouchable" communities were largely left out of the process. Anyway, the island's complex history helped to generate a new wave of appreciation towards western ideals on individual freedom and dignity in the minds of a new generation of "untouchables". Ayyappan was no exception.

Ever since their first meeting, Ayyappan remained as an ardent devotee of Guru. With his active encouragement, he completed a Bachelor's degree programme at a prominent college in Ernakulam. He later took a degree in law. With his oratory skills, Ayyappan inspired the masses. He spoke in favor of the downtrodden communities with the governmental authorities. His term in the state legislature of Thiruvananthapuram and his tenure as a minister in the government established his credentials as a genuine visionary.

Ayyappan was also revered as a pioneer journalist. He founded and edited the magazine *Sahodaran* to propagate his concept of humanism. Ayyappan was also instrumental in publishing *Yukthiuvadi*, the first atheist journal in Malayalam. It was first published in August 1929 to

express rationalist thoughts and ideas. Ayyappan was also credited as one of the founding fathers of the organized labour movement in Kerala. He organized Kerala's first labour union in 1926 in Vypin. Ayyappan also took the lead in introducing the socio-economic and political impact of the Russian socialist revolution in Kerala.

More than anything else, Ayyappan was widely recognized as the most outspoken and popular revolutionary among the followers of Guru. He was a rationalist to the core. At times, he was forthright in stating his independent opinion on matters of God, religion and caste that even seemed to differ from the views of Guru. As a foot soldier for implementing the humanistic ideals envisioned by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyappan pioneered many social engineering programmes in the caste-ridden society. With his radical approach to societal issues, Ayyappan forced many social changes in Kerala almost a century ago.

Ayyappan was fondly called as *Sahodaran Ayyappan* as a genuine believer of brotherhood. *Sahodaran* is the Malayalam term for "brother". Sahodaran Ayyappan heralded the Brotherhood Movement in Kerala. With the blessings of Guru, a historic meeting of the Brotherhood Movement or *Sahodara Sangom* took place on May 15, 1921 in Guru's Adwaita Ashram in Aluva. As part of the meet, thousands of copies of Guru's handwritten message declaring the oneness of humanity were widely distributed among the younger generation across the state.

Mould Men, Women beyond Religion

In almost all public discourses in Kerala, Guru's messages are quoted daily. One of the most favorite of Guru's quotes cited by many is: "*Matham Eathayalum Manushyan Nannayal Mathi.*" This progressive statement is generally considered by many as the most relevant of Guru's messages to contemporary society. This message was expressed during a frank conversation between Guru and Sahodaran Ayyappan, in the Adwaita Ashramam on August 1, 1923.

The reason and circumstances that prompted Sahodaran Ayyappan to open the conversation with Guru require a careful analysis. Guru had been leading a socio-religious reformative movement across Kerala since 1888. His movement made huge impact on the lives

of numerous downtrodden people within a short span of time. Yet, the overall character of the society was critically backward and primitive. Many of the discriminative practices, including policies of the governments, continued without much interruption. The traditionally privileged groups and their royal patrons preferred to either ignore or to suppress the legitimate voices of the untouchable communities.

Even in 1923, most public roads as well as public educational systems were closed to the untouchable communities. Their freedom of movement and quest for learning were curtailed by superstitious rules and regulations founded on caste prejudices. But the royal authorities and the orthodoxy realized they were losing ground. So, they had to invent new justifications for denying the just demands of people. So, they cited the sanctity of temples along with the protection of religious rights as reasons for keeping the public pathways closed to the "lower castes". Their weird argument was that as most public pathways and adjacent resting places were within the proximity of temples, entry by untouchables in these areas would pollute the temple.

But to the dismay of the royal government, the valiant Ezhava chieftains did not buy the argument. They revised the strategy and demanded not just the right to enter the streets but the temples too. The Hindu conservative establishment became furious hearing the new demand. The atmosphere was heated up as conservatives also joined the fray. As the government took a tough stand, the arena was all set for the face off between the two opposing forces.

The Ezhava leaders felt that if their plight was the direct result of their membership in the caste-ridden Hinduism, there was no justification for the continuation of such a losing relationship. So, they reached a consensus to leave the Hindu religion. Soon various factions were formed within Ezhavas based on their choice of the religion they wanted to adopt. A prominent faction led by C.V. Kunjuraman vied for Christianity while Sahodaran Ayyappan's group voted for Buddhism. Another group under the leadership of T.K. Madhavan stood for staying within Hinduism. Rather than escaping it, Madhavan argued for intensifying the agitations to acquire their rights. A few others wanted to embrace Islam. Each group began

their aggressive campaign to influence the members of the Ezhava community. The ensuing chaos was felt all over Kerala.

“One Religion, One Caste”

While the religious conversion issue was going on in Kerala, Guru was in Tamil Nadu. Guru was very fond of the love and affection of the Tamil devotees. Guru decided to return to the Advaita Ashram in Aluva. Everyone was anxiously waiting for his return. Sahodaran Ayyappan also arrived there. The following is a transcript of that conversation between them.

Guru: Ayyappan, I heard that Doctor (Palpu) is favouring religious conversion.

Ayyappan: A few of them are thinking on that line.

Guru: If an individual tread a righteous path, what more is required? Isn't that enough? Conversion should mean a transformative journey in that direction.

Ayyappan: It seems that Buddhism is better equipped to transform a person.

Guru: Are all Buddhists perfect? I have heard that some among them even consume fish and alcohol. Some even engage in discriminatory practices!

Ayyappan: I agree. Among Buddhists of today, ideal ones are rare indeed.

Guru: What a plight! I also heard that the Buddhist monks are supposed to eat what they get in their plate as offering. And they won't say no to what they receive! They naturally develop an appetite for non-vegetarian food, and then people would be inclined to offer food to their liking. But is that a good practice?

Ayyappan: It is quite unfortunate that today's Buddhism is also contaminated. Yet I do not think there are any other better choices for personal transformation than Buddha's teachings.

Guru: What about the sermons of Christ? Prophet Muhammad's messages are also great. Can we claim that all adherents of those

religions are also perfect? So, regardless of religious orientation, individuals shall always endeavour to transform themselves. Keep the words, mind and deeds virtuous, and guard against any violation. Uphold the values. Be vigilant to preserve the unswerving purity of the mind So that the requirement for remorse shall never occur. That is the *jivan-mukta-vasta* or the realm of Liberation!

Ayyappan: Buddhists term it *Nirvana*.

Guru: Exactly! Shamelessly, people are addicted with caste. Even Sankaracharya deserved some blame for it. Ved Vyasa, who composed *Brahmasutra* and *Gita*, also interpreted *Chatur-vamya* in two different contexts. Caste must be discarded. There is no other alternative. Humanity is one caste! Abandon the notion of caste to ensure the realization of this truth. What is Kumaran Asan's opinion on religious conversion?

Ayyappan: Asan feels that deciding on conversion without knowing Swami's mind is not desirable as it can be interpreted as a direct challenge to Swami's stature.

Guru: Is it so?

Ayyappan: Asan's stand is that priority should be given to discern Swami's outlook.

Guru: Has my view not yet been stated? Ayyappan, do you know my view?

Ayyappan: Surely! Swami harbours no ill feeling towards any religion. Swami's conviction is that regardless of attributes such as religion, appearance, and language, people should live together as one community.

Guru: That is what I stand for! The meaning of religion must be taken just as the view of a person (*as religion only means 'opinion'*). As such, holding different views does not present a problem for us to interact together as people. The idea needs to be stressed is that there shall be no caste distinction. That is what I aspire for. It will happen. I am fully convinced. Just think about Satyavrathan! He is perfectly free of caste feelings. Don't you agree? (*Swami Satyavrathan was a sanyasi disciple of Guru. He was born a Nair, traditionally considered*

an upper caste. He was also in charge of the Advaita Ashram at the time this conversation took place- author's note).

Ayyappan: I have no doubt about it. Satyavratha Swami has indeed reached such a state.

Guru: As far as caste is concerned, I very much doubt whether anyone among us can assert to be free of such feelings like Satyavratana. I am not sure even Lord Buddha was able to renounce caste with such intensity. Satyavratana is unique in that sense. Evidently, we could also emulate people like him. By the way, what is wrong with Hinduism? The adherents of *Aryasamajam* and *Brahmasamajam* are also Hindus. And they discarded caste.

Ayyappan: I don't think they are Hindus. They claim to be Hindus to strengthen their appeal among the masses. It is true that they approve the Vedas. But they interpret it in their own way to accept its authority.

Guru: Is that so?

Ayyappan: Some groups hope that Swami is going to initiate a mass conversion. Anticipating such a move, many have developed a new-found admiration for Swami (in a sarcastic tone to imply his disapproval of such a trend).

Guru: (Laughing). That is appealing. Also, understandable!

Ayyappan: Also, there are some people who question the heed for religious conversion. After all, they feel that a "Sree Narayana religion" quite fits their aptitude. Yet when they are advised to follow up on their wish, those same people feel it a cumbersome choice.

Guru: Why are you thinking on that line? Each person deserves the right to choose the religion of their choice.

Ayyappan: Yes, Swami has stated that already.

Guru: That is what I want to stress again. If anyone genuinely feels to desert their current religious faith and wish to join a new one, such a person should do so without hesitation. All deserve such a freedom. But acting hypocritically as far as religious allegiance is concerned is not at all desirable. Religion shall be of individual preference! A

father's religion may not appeal to the son. Yes, Freedom of faith! That is what my unflinching opinion. Do you follow me on that?

Ayyappan: I have been doing that. Recently, in the legal document for transacting a property, I stated Buddhism as my religion.

Guru: (Laughing). So, you omitted caste. Is that so? That is great! Never mention caste! Caste must go! All people should live as one caste. Proclaim this everywhere and all the time. A time will come when there will be no caste. For the entire humanity, there is only one caste, the caste of humanism. That is my religion.

Primacy of Individual Virtue

Two days after the conversation with Ayyappan, Guru's biographer and traveling companion Kottukkoyikkal Velayudhan posed some questions to him. It was centered basically on the issue of religious conversion. This conversation was especially worthy because Guru proclaimed the golden words now etched in the minds even today: "*Matham Ethayalum Manushyan Nannayal Mathi.*" (Let the religion be any; striving for goodness is all that matters.)

Kottukkoyikkal: Without a fundamental change in nature, isn't it religious conversion meaningless?

Guru: Is that what is happening? Genuine conversion takes place when a person undergoes a profound change. For example, if a person who was accustomed to non-vegetarian food decides to dramatically change and becomes a strict vegetarian, that is to be characterized as conversion. That is what an authentic conversion is. Some people feel that religious conversion is necessary for physical uplifting. I do not know the truth of it.

Kottukkoyikkal: Under the current circumstances, some people prefer to convert to Christianity for material freedom. Also, for the same reason, there are groups who are recommending Buddhism while some advocate Islam.

Guru: (After a few dialogues explaining his displeasure with the tactic of using caste as a unifying element, Guru continues the conversation)

What are the main arguments of those who want to desert Hinduism?

Kottukkoyikkal: They consider that Hindu religious literature is contaminated. It is believed that the *Vedas* and *Bhagavat Gita* glorify animal sacrifice as well as crude form of polytheism along with casteism.

Guru: May be *Vedas* include things like that. Still those scriptures also intermittently contain worthy principles and transcendental concepts. The followers of religions that have better literature can behave pathetically too. So, whatever the qualities of religious literature, it is irrelevant if people fail to reflect those values in their conduct. Individuals must strive for their own self improvement. Caste must be discarded. Everyone should ensure the sanctity of their deeds, words and thoughts, and if that happens religion becomes secondary. Hinduism contains the fundamental tenets of many other major religions. Do you know, any Christians or Muslims returning to Hinduism?

Kottukkoyikkal: In certain pockets, some Christians returned to Hinduism. In North India, some Muslims were adopted by Arya Samaj.

Guru: So, it seems that if equality and dignity are honoured, many would embrace Hinduism also. Don't you agree? Reformation is what matters! "*Matham Ethayalum Manushyan Nannayal Mathi.*" [Author's note—The essence of this core message of Guru can be interpreted thus: Believe in any religion but the pursuit of virtue by an individual is all that matters. Religion is meaningful only if it kindles the flame of virtue).]

Humanism Supersedes Religion

As we see in the above two conversations, Guru's concept of religion focused more on human beings than on God. According to Guru's philosophy, the so-called religions are only means to lead one towards God. To Guru, religion is not an essential requirement for those who can realize God through a higher understanding of the principles

of God. In that sense, any religion is sufficient enough for leading individuals in the right path. So, Guru did not support the arguments in favour of religious conversion on spiritual grounds. Religious conversion for material welfare was also not approved by Guru. Instead, Guru recommended reform from within to initiate changes in the structure of contaminated religious systems that remain a hindrance to progress.

Interestingly, the theme of Guru's detailed conversation with Mahatma Gandhi was also centered on the need to reform Hindu religion. Even then, to a certain extent, Guru defended and justified those who decided to convert to other religions for material progress. Responding to Gandhi, Guru again proved his neutrality on religious preference and indicated that his loyalty was not towards any specific religion but to the ultimate welfare of the people. At the same time, Guru viewed the intended drive for massive conversion by many quarters as undesirable. As a free and fearless thinker, Guru was not bound by any institutionalized interests or religious loyalties. He was aspiring for the genuine internal transformation of individuals along with their material progress regardless of religious allegiance.

Sree Narayana Guru defines God in his philosophical writings as pure Knowledge. Most Indian philosophers traditionally define God as *Sat-Chit-Ananda* which means pure Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. To Guru, there is only one religion unique to all beings—the ingrained striving for self-bliss or *atma-sukha* (*Atmopadesha Satakam*- Verses 49).

The ancient rishis of the Upanishads proclaimed *Aham Brahmasi* as they realized the Truth of themselves in relation to the Supreme Being or Brahma. The above phrase thus reflects the boundless joy of that profound experience. The *rishis* 'conceptualized internalization of God' as the process for experiencing God. This knowledge-based revelation was a dramatic and revolutionary shift on spirituality from the ritual oriented, contaminated and priest-centered Vedic traditions. Following the paths of Buddha and Sankara, Guru reinterpreted the original wisdom of the *rishis* in the contemporary context. Like the ancient *rishis*, Guru declared in unequivocal terms that we are all connected.

The Biblical proclamation that the "*Kingdom of God is within you*" was a clear philosophical deviation from the deteriorated, ritual-oriented and mainstream spiritual culture which existed during the time of Jesus Christ. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew talk about *The Sermon on the Mount*, the most fundamental teachings of Christ. *The Sermon on the Mount* remains the essence of Christian ethics. It has attracted the attention of philosophers and moral thinkers for the last two millennia. According to those Sermons, Jesus advises his disciples about the various aspects of the path of perfection including the purity of heart and righteousness to cultivate a new spiritual culture.

Jesus did not repudiate the Old Testament but gave new and relevant meaning to those old concepts. During the 16th century, Protestant Reformation under the leadership of Martin Luther took the Catholic Church by storm. They argued against the doctrines of the Catholic Church such as the "merits of the saints" and accused them of deviating from the fundamental teachings of Christ. The thinkers of the Reformation movement questioned the authority of Pope and the Church's interpretations of the Bible. They urged theologians and believers to reject the teachings of the corrupted Church establishment and sought a return to the original gospels. They proclaimed, "Salvation can be achieved through faith alone."

Later, Russian writer Leo Tolstoy published a book titled "*Kingdom of God is within You*". He despised the moral decay of the Church and its deviations from the original Gospels. While criticizing the Church establishments, Tolstoy wrote: "Nowhere nor in anything, except in the assertion of the Church, can we find that God or Christ founded anything like churchmen as understood by the Church." The Russian Orthodox Church treated Tolstoy as an enemy of the Church. When the young Mahatma Gandhi arrived in London as a Law student in 1888, he read Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is within You* and was overwhelmed. Gandhiji later acknowledged its influence on his personal and public life. He was captivated by the power of its message on non-violence as conceptualized by Tolstoy.

Just like Christ, Martin Luther and later Tolstoy who relied on the ancient Biblical doctrines to reinvent their philosophical moorings, Guru also built his theology on the old foundations of the

Upanishad tradition. Just like the Sermon on the Mount induces a renewed interest in the wisdom of the Old Testament and the Love of God, Guru's prominent philosophic books (such as *Atmopadesha Satkam* and *Darsanamala*) also prompt serious readers to immerse in the timeless wisdom of the ancient *Upanishads* to grasp its original meaning in the new context.

Guru never allowed himself to be confined within the constraints of any religion, philosophical tradition or school of thought. He was not only receptive to the wisdom espoused by all great personalities but held them close to his heart. In one of his works, *Anukampadasakam* (Ten Verses on Compassion), Guru reminisces on the virtues of Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ, Prophet Muhammed, Sankara and many other *siddhas* and sages. As a free thinker, he wanted to declare his independence from all institutions including religion. But Guru's questions, comments and concerns reveal an aspiration for the continuation of a purified *Upanishad* tradition, rich in philosophical wisdom and cleared of the stains of caste.

Theology of Ethical Spirituality

Poem on Moral and Ethical Life

As Sree Narayana Guru was busy engaged in the welfare of the vast population of southern India, many affluent supporters came forward to raise adequate funds for his philanthropic deeds. When one such benefactor offered a bungalow in the heart of the city of Chennai, Guru graciously accepted the gift. The donor was nicknamed reverentially as Alummoovil Channar. He was the richest Ezhava chieftain in Travancore in those days. Only two people reportedly then owned automobiles in Travancore; one was the Maharaja or king of Travancore and the other was Alummoovil Channar.

During that time, Guru was running an orphanage along with his ashram in Sivagiri. He provided shelter and education to several children from the so-called Dalit communities. When the rich man offered his property in a famed city, it was a great support to Guru

to finance his charitable activities. Guru turned the bungalow into a hostel and rented it out to people looking for accommodation. The monthly rent from the tenants became a regular source of income for taking care of the Dalit children at the ashram. Unfortunately, a change of mind took place in the Alummottil family. Some members of the family thought that it was not prudent to give away such a property in charity. They forced the elder Channar to take legal steps to regain the property.

Reportedly, the incident prompted Guru to compile a poem in 1920, titled "*Sadacharam*" or "Codes for Ideal Behaviour." The relatively small poetry describes the fundamental ethical and moral values people should follow for long-term success, divine blessings as well as peace of mind in life. "*Sadacharam*" reflects the essence of the *dharmic* ideals and values propounded by the ancient Upanishads. The poem also reminds us of the moral teachings of *Thirukkural* written by Thiruvalluvar, the Tamil poet and sage who lived around two thousand years ago. Guru had high regards for the Upanishads as well as *Thirukkural*. He translated Isa Vasya Upanishad from Sanskrit and excerpts of *Thirukkural* from Tamil into Malayalam. Guru wanted society to imbibe the invaluable teachings of these ancient books of wisdom so that people may internalize those values.

Sadacharam represents a list of statements as advisory on ideal conduct. It states it is not ideal to forget or ignore the benevolent acts of others while it is better to instantly cleanse our mind of any trace of the disheartening deeds of others. Guru reminds us that only righteousness and truth shall triumph in the long run while immorality and falsehood will never lead us to peace or progress. On charity, Guru says while watering plants, unworthy weeds also may benefit. But if we avoid the act altogether to avoid watering weeds, it will be self-defeating. Worthy people shall never part with their naturally earned reputation and stature. The wicked ones find no value in it.

Human beings shall always uphold a value-based life of truth and virtue. Remember that all material attributes are subject to peril. Reclaiming an asset given in charity shall be a cause of curse for posterity. The old saying of the wise in this regard is full of truth.

The one who repossess a previously gifted object is the most pitiable fellow. There shall be none more destitute than such a person.

Sadacharam is the simplest of Sree Narayana Guru's long list of literary contributions as far as the usage of language, complexity of content and philosophical realm is concerned. Yet, it is pregnant with invaluable lessons.

Light as Idol

It was in Karamukku, a place near Thrissur, that Sree Narayana Guru initiated a dramatic shift to his temple movement. Until then Guru was consecrating the popular idols of Hindu pantheon as deities in his temples. As a continuation of the process of socio-religious reformation through the right to worship, Guru turned to the next level in his concept of spirituality with the installation of a lighted lamp as the idol in a temple at Karamukku.

Unlike most social reformers of his time, Guru based his reform on the foundations of the existing spiritual culture of the people. Hence the medium of the temple became a central element for the downtrodden communities awakening. Being a sanyasi, Guru traveled continuously from one place to another. Wherever he went, people used to throng around him seeking solace and guidance.

Guru knew that people were not only lacking basic material necessities of life but also ideal havens to satisfy their social and spiritual needs. So, it became a part of Guru's mission to civilize and reform the communities through gradual social and spiritual awakening by opening temples. With the active guidance of Guru, many temples were built and some old ones were revamped to fit Guru's reformatory ideals. Miraculously, people everywhere abided by Guru's wishes without a murmur even though many had to abandon their patterns of worship and systems of belief. As a result, Guru's temple movement that began in the rural outskirts of Aruvippuram in 1888 prompted the formation of a network of temples in various parts of Southern India within a few decades. His motive was to gradually uplift the devotees from their crude and primitive ways of worship to a refined and cultured mode without fundamentally altering their spiritual orientation.

While Guru was visiting the area in 1920, some elders from the Ezhava community in Karamukku approached him and sought a temple in their community. When Guru asked about their choice of the deity to be consecrated, they agreed to abide by his decision. Guru made a sarcastic comment to test their commitment to the temple as well as to provoke them to think about their goals behind a shrine. Guru asked them: "What is the use of a dark and stinky temple?"

Although a bit perplexed by Guru's unexpected question, the staunch supporters of the proposed temple stood their ground. One of them offered a response that pleased Guru. "Temples offer the people an ideal facility to cultivate the habit of hygiene as nobody would visit them without taking a bath or with dirty clothes."

Guru agreed. "Yes, indeed! The interior of the temple should be clean and fresh all the time. Rather than an idol as a deity, a lighted lamp in the middle is enough. A light is symbolic of *Maha Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. Make it a tradition to come to the temple with a pure mind and body."

The Ezhava leader argued: "We do not feel that is enough to satisfy the devotees. People need a specific deity familiar to them such as Mother Goddess, Lord Subramanya, Vinayaka, or Shiva."

"Placing the portraits of great souls around the light shall suffice," Guru responded.

After the temple was constructed, Guru was invited to open it for the public on May 13, 1921. The organizers wanted the deity of Lord Shiva to be consecrated, and they prepared one for the ceremony. Guru put the idol aside and told them to bring a lamp instead. He lighted the lamp and placed it on the pedestal. Guru calmly said: "Let there be light." The temple is named after *Lord Shiva* as *Chidambara Temple*. The lighted lamp consecrated by Guru has been attracting devotees with its divine and eternal flame ever since.

After the installation, Guru offered a few words of advice to the devotees. The theme was the idea of gaining knowledge as the key to material and spiritual progress. Guru said, "Build learning centres."

The devotees took Guru's message to heart and built a school as part of the temple complex. The temple and the school flourish even today as monuments to Guru's vision of a novel spiritual culture.

Ideals as Idol

Sree Narayana Guru was neither a conventional *sanyasin* nor a traditional spiritualist. Guru's innovative vision was evident in the way he led his followers gradually towards a refined spiritual culture. He began his movement of socio-spiritual revolution with the installation of Lord Siva in 1888 at Aruvippuram to establish the right to faith among the traditionally abandoned population. Thereafter, Guru espoused the temple movement as a vital path to uplift the people around him in a systematic and progressive way. As part of the faith movement, Guru tried to enlighten and educate the people through a series of transformational phases.

After consecrating a lighted lamp as the deity in Karamukku, Guru proceeded with his spiritual revolution to other regions of Kerala. When devotees from a village named Murukkumpuzha approached him with a request to establish a new temple by replacing a dilapidated shrine, Guru instantly gave his consent. Guru had a novel idea in mind. He was determined to make another dramatic shift to further propel the temple movement.

As part of the offerings at the old shrine that was replaced, people had been following uncivilized and demeaning rituals. Upon reaching the shrine, Guru ordered the removal of the existing deity and the old structure. A new temple was built at the site. There Guru installed a unique and unconventional deity on February 5, 1923. The local devotees had originally wished to have the new temple dedicated to Lord Shiva but Guru made them accept his choice of deity.

Until then nobody had seen or heard about the kind of deity Guru was about to install at the Murukkumpuzha temple. The deity was a simple metal shield but the few inscriptions on it made all the difference. In the temple tradition of India, such an idol had never been installed as a deity. In the middle of the shield, the sacred word AUM, the pranava mantra was inscribed. Around AUM, the following words were inscribed in beautiful letters: "*Satyam, Dharmam, Dayaa, Shanti*" which stood for the eternal humanistic values of Truth, Righteousness, Compassion and Peace.

Guru's innovative and creative action was aimed at defining his concept of God. By installing a shield of ideals as the deity, Guru

wanted to declare that God can exist in the minds of devotees in the form of ideas. Moreover, Guru affirmed that any image was qualified to represent God including a metal shield as long as the devotee was able to perceive it so. As a proponent of the *Advaita* philosophy, to Guru, everything was a manifestation of Brahma or God.

Guru's temple movement had multifaceted goals for uplifting and transforming the society. In those days of severe segregation based on caste, Dalits were not permitted near the sites of traditional Ezhava shrines. Through the establishment of a new temple culture, Guru prompted his followers to rescue themselves from the hold of outdated habits and superstitious beliefs. Guru made sure that his temples were open to all. He especially ensured that members of the *Dalit* communities had the right and freedom to seek the deity's blessings in the *Murukkumpuzha Temple* also.

“Holy Mirror” as Temple Deity

The installation of a carved mirror in place of a traditional deity in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple in mid-Kerala by Sree Narayana Guru has been a topic of serious debate since the event took place in 1927. Even though every act of social importance initiated by Guru was marked by certain unique characteristics, placing a mirror as the deity was beyond people's imagination. It continues to generate an unparallel level of curiosity among scholars as well as lay people. Moreover, philosophers, spiritualists, sociologists, theists, atheists, agnostics, and many others still strain to interpret the explicit and implicit implications of that intriguing act.

Sree Narayana Guru's four-decades long socio-religious activism that began in 1888 and continued in the form of erecting new temples across southern India entered its final phase by 1927. Through that novel form of rebellion against the religious orthodoxy, Guru secured for the untouchable communities the long-denied right to a refined form of faith and spirituality. Over four decades, he had consecrated about thirty temples dedicated to the gods of traditional Hindu pantheon in various places in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In addition, under his direction, many temples

were sanctified by his ascetic disciples to satisfy the religious requirements of the common folks.

Guru also issued a proclamation in 1917 stating his preference for building knowledge centers instead of more places of worship. Regardless, the newly energized community of marginalized in many regions of Kerala continued to construct new temples and renovate the old shrines. To them, temples provided a perfect platform to reclaim their dignity as people. It also served as an avenue to bring various groups of people together. As a considerate spiritual authority and religious master, Guru tried his best to aid such efforts. Guru never allowed his philosophical preferences or ideological reservations to undermine the good intentions of others.

That was the background when a group of people came to the Nagombadom Temple in Kottayam where Guru was resting. Their intention was to invite Guru to their native place for installing a deity of Lord *Artha-Naareeshwara* in the renovated temple at Kalavankodam in Cherthala. After reaching Kottayam, Padmanabha Panicker, the leader of the group, explained to Guru the purpose of their visit. Guru said, "I will come to Chethala once you build a few schools and other institutions for society's development." It appeared that Guru wanted to express his displeasure over the extravagant temple-building habit of the community. So many people in Cherthala were steeped in poverty. Guru was more concerned about developing educational and job opportunities for them.

Without giving any assurance to the group from Cherthala, Guru left for Poonjar, a village a few miles away from Kottayam. Guru didn't return to Kottayam even after two days. However, the group didn't want to go back without Guru and anxiously waited for him. As Guru did not return as they had expected, Padmanabha Panicker, understandably frustrated at the turn of events, went to the entrance of the Nagombadom Temple and took a vow to commit suicide.

Miraculously, less than a few hours after his vow, Guru arrived. As if he had read their mind, he told the group as well as some of his disciples: "Let us go to Cherthala now."

When Guru and the group reached Cherthala, the final arrangements for the grand event were progressing. Guru stayed in a nearby home. Soon, the calm and joyful mood of the atmosphere

gave way to chaos and panic as a rival group reached the scene. They demanded an end to all preparations for the deity installation. The leader of the rebel group, a young K.C. Kuttan, expressed to Guru their disapproval of the planned deity installation. The other group argued with the rebels. As the heated exchanges went on, Guru called the warring factions and asked them to explain their points of view. A large crowd had gathered near the temple site. The situation was explosive.

A few tense moments passed. Everybody anxiously waited for Guru's words. The fire of heated passions gave way to calmness. People stopped speaking.

Guru broke the silence by asking for a mirror. Without knowing what Guru had in mind, a new mirror was brought to him. Guru said: "Remove its frame and cut away three inches from it." An expert did that. "Carve the mantra *Aum Shanti* in the top center by scraping the mercury from the rear." Once the job was done, he wanted the mirror reframed.

Guru carried the carved mirror to the temple and installed it in the sanctum sanctorum. The time was exactly four in the morning. The extraordinary event took place on June 14, 1927. There was not a single murmur from the agitated men on both sides. The witnessing crowd was speechless. Hence the carved mirror became the main deity of the temple. A few minutes later, the *sanyasin* disciples who accompanied Guru consecrated the original idols prepared for the ceremony and placed them on the pedestals in the sanctum sanctorum. The rituals were soon over. Everyone seemed satisfied with the turn of events.

Mirror and Its Implications

The unprecedented action of Guru at that challenging moment around nine decades ago implied his philosophical acumen, ingenuity, pragmatism and sense of humour. Guru's creative genius and wisdom along with his unquestionable acceptance among the masses as the foremost spiritual master and religious authority neutralized a potentially explosive situation. Moreover, that moment became a defining episode in his four-decade long theological and philosophical

pursuit when he initiated a radical deviation from temple traditions by putting up a mirror as the deity.

Why did Sree Narayana Guru choose to install a mirror as a deity in the Kalavamkodam Temple? What did it mean? Did he intent to repudiate deity worship? Was he acting upon his Vedic instincts to proclaim the Advaita doctrine?

It is hard to obtain clear answers to these queries. As Guru did not explicitly explain why he did what he did, many scholars have offered their interpretations. The answers reflect the socio-political and philosophical orientation of the respondent. I believe that to decipher its meaning, one needs to delve deeper into the devotional and philosophical writings of Guru as the primary source rather than relying on personal assumptions.

Guru's volumes of hymns and philosophical poems provide us the resources to find an answer. It is important to understand Guru's definition of God. From *Daiva-dasakam*, the small prayer composed by Guru in 1914, to *Darsana-mala*, a sophisticated book on philosophy and spirituality, Guru speaks about the existence of God and defines all creations as God's manifestations. Guru never doubts the existence of God. None of his poetic verses or prose writings has anything contrary to this central notion.

Guru's intimate feelings of affection and devotion towards his favourite deities are reflected in his famous hymns. Those deep expressions of emotions, filled with mesmerizing rhythm, as echoed in the many hymns on Vinayaka, Subramanya, Shiva and Mother Goddess, do not appeared to be just displays of poetic genius. We can feel in them the freshness of Guru's experiences as an accomplished *sadhaka*.

Without attempting to elevate to such a higher plateau of devotion, one cannot fully grasp the genuineness, authenticity or power of such experiences. Such an understanding is a prerequisite for enhancing our ability to interpret Guru's spiritual ventures. The meaning of the "mirror" as a deity would become clearer only in such a spiritual plateau. Some argue that the installation of mirror implies the irrelevance of temple and deity worship. Others claim that as the mirror reflects our own image, Guru suggests

that no God exists but us. On the contrary, the mirror as a deity reiterates the genuine need to reexamine our modes of worship and understanding of God in a more refined way. Guru's mirror demands us to clean up our internal stains so that our true self or soul can shine like a clean mirror. Then only we would be qualified to receive and experience God.

A few days later, Guru again consecrated a mirror with the sacred word "AUM" inscribed on it in a small village on the outskirts of Vaikkom in Kerala. The new temple was named "*Aumkareshwaram*" or the abode of AUM. With that Guru ended his four-decade-long temple mission.

Even though Guru as a *rishi* mostly preferred to express his ideas through the genre of poetry, he also wrote a few prayers in the form of prose. The central theme in all the prayers is the acknowledgement of the existence of God. In *Athma-vilasam*, one of his prayers in prose, Guru elaborately discusses the role of mirror as a tool for reflecting the various manifestations of God through a chain of successive forms and actions.

The following is a translation of a few lines from the introductory passage of that lengthy prayer:

"Everything seems like images in a mirror! Miraculous! The eye that sees everything does not see the eye. As a mirror is placed before the eye, the eye is reflected in the mirror. The eye then sees the mirror and the image of the eye. The image is inert in nature. It doesn't have the power to see the eye. The eye can't turn around and see the eye. As the eye and its image are not seen in the eye, it is the "I" that sees the eye. Then again, the eye can't see the "I" that sees the eye. When a mirror is imagined before us, we are reflected in that mirror. But that image cannot see us as our image has no life. What we are seeing is the mirror that is imagined within us and the image of us that is reflected in the mirror. Then it is the God above us who sees us."

Guru continues, "Then God is a Holy Mirror and the Eye too!" After a vivid description of the magnificent scenes and experiences that pass through his imaginative mirror, Guru visualizes all of that disappear into the abyss of the Holy Mirror. Guru declares: "This Holy Mirror is my God!"

So, it is not possible to grasp the philosophical and spiritual realms of Sree Narayana Guru's "Holy Mirror" without internalizing the true meaning of his writings.

The social implications of Guru's mirror installation deserve special attention along with its philosophical and spiritual dimensions. Guru was conscious of the dehumanizing attitudes nurtured by the institutionalized religion and temple establishment. The prevailing atmosphere was detrimental to the personal dignity of the downtrodden. In a way, Guru began his temple movement as an indirect protest against such blatant injustice. By establishing temples across southern India, Guru aspired to activate a new spiritual culture that promotes universal human values. Without doubt, the last phase of Guru's temple installations visibly exemplified this aspect. As deities are symbolic expressions of the manifestations of God, as a spiritual scientist and practitioner, Guru knew their value well and applied it sincerely and elegantly.

Acts of Compassion

Appeal to the Arabian Sea

After the formation of S.N.D.P Yogam, Sree Narayana Guru traveled to many regions of Kerala. Guru used the occasion to spread the message of the new organization. Many notable people joined it after listening to Guru. With their financial help and cooperation, Guru initiated the formation of many facilities for uplifting the downtrodden across the state. During these journeys, people flocked to Guru to receive guidance for improving their lives.

On one such occasion in September, 1916, Guru reached Kurkancherry, a village near Trissur, to consecrate the Maheswara Temple. While Guru was there, a person named Vykkattu Sankaran approached Guru with his young son Bhojarajan. He had faith in Guru and believed that only Guru could save his family from an imminent catastrophe that seemed to threaten his very existence. Sankaran's family home was situated in Vadanappally, a coastal island village

in the outskirts of Trissur. The Arabian Sea was only two hundred meters away from his home, the Vykattu Tharavadu, an aristocratic family in the area.

The sea was so rough around the time when Guru was in Trissur that it almost threatened to swallow the Vykattu Tharavadu. Many homes in the area had already been destroyed by the waves. Unable to withstand the heavy rains and storms, giant coconut palms on the coast had fallen into the sea. Sankaran rushed to Guru as the shore was being eaten away at an alarming pace by the approaching sea. He knew that it was only a matter of time before his home would become just a memory.

When Sankaran approached, Guru was having some serious consultation with his followers. Sankaran pleaded with Guru to save his family from the approaching calamity. Guru immediately instructed his disciple Bodhananda Swami to follow Sankaran to his village. He promised to join them the next day.

Bodhananda Swami went straight to the shore close to Sankaran's home and lay on the sand facing the violent sea. As giant waves rushed to the shore one after another, people who were watching the scene got scared and ran to a safe distance.

To the surprise of everyone, the huge waves subsided as they approached Bodhananda Swami. The sea continued to unleash its might without any compassion in adjacent places, but the waves stayed away from Sankaran's home. Bodhananda Swami didn't get up from the spot until the arrival of Guru. As promised, Guru came the next day, went to the Vykattu Tharavadu, rested there for a while and assured the family of safety. He then walked towards the shore where Bodhananda Swami was lying and told him to get up. By that time, the sea had calmed down. Guru then assured the Sankaran family: "The sea here will remain calm/'

The Vykattu Tharavadu family home, now more than three hundred years old, still safely stands near the shore of the Arabian Sea. Sankaran's son Bhojarajan, who accompanied his father on that fateful day, lived in this home until his death. Now his son Balagopalan and his wife, both engineers, are living in the family home. Even when the deadly tsunami of 2004 devastated the coastal communities with a vengeance, Balagopalan did not move out despite

many warnings. His faith in Guru was such that the one-hundred-foot high waves failed to frighten him.

Aiding a Poor Thief!

While the construction of the Sanskrit school was going on as part of the extension of the Aluva Advaita Ashram, a strange thing took place. There lived a poor person in the neighbourhood in a dilapidated house. One day, one of the main wooden beams of his house broke, and the structure itself was ready to collapse. Unfortunately, he did not have the means to replace that costly beam. As he spent a few days cursing his bad luck, he happened to notice the newly cut wooden beams at the courtyard of the Advaita Ashram. So, he decided to steal one of the beams at night. He visited the ashram during the day and identified a piece that would suit his need.

As night came, the ashram and its surroundings were covered in a veil of darkness. Everyone was asleep. He waited for the right moment. In the middle of the night, he stealthily entered the compound of the ashram. Without making any noise, he tried to lift that beam so that he could carry it on his shoulders. The beam was too heavy for him. He needed help to put that heavy wooden piece on his shoulder. But who would help him? He was heartbroken. To his great surprise, someone tapped his shoulder mildly and in the dark helped to lift the beam onto his shoulder. Before he could think, the beam was perfectly in balance on his shoulder. Before leaving he wanted to see who had helped him. "Oh! My God!" The wooden beam was about to fall as he was shivering with guilt and shame.

The helper was none other than Guru himself.

"Calm down my dear fellow. Take it and fix your home. Be careful!"

The sage whispered. He didn't want any harm to happen to that poor man.

At the break of dawn, the theft became known.

"Some intruders came last night and stole a valuable piece of wood."

"Let us find the thief right away!"

Soon the inmates and helpers of the ashram went into action. They searched all around the neighbourhood.

"Here it is!"

One searcher exclaimed, and all others rushed to the spot.

The thief was caught. The man tried incessantly to convince the captors that it was Guru who gave it to him. But who was going to believe a thief?

So, he was brought back to the ashram to the court of Sree Narayana Guru. The Guru compassionately described the plight of the poor man and acknowledged that the piece of wood was taken with his permission.

"He is not a thief. He is just a poor man," Guru said softly.

Saving a Marriage

While Guru was staying at the Sivagiri Ashram, a few visitors came from Kollam. One was a lady who was just married. Her name was Naani. Her husband was also in the group. Naani was the sister-in-law of T.V. Narayani-amma, a pioneer social worker who set up hostels for ladies in many cities of Kerala. It was Narayani-amma who brought them to the Sivagiri Ashram.

Narayani-amma was a close disciple of Guru and she belonged to a prominent Ezhava family in mid-Kerala. It was Guru who nicknamed Narayani-amma as *Sadana-matha* or *guardian-mother* as a mark of respect. Guru was a pioneer proponent of higher education for women in Kerala. One day, Guru urged Narayani-amma to take up the leadership in establishing hostels for ladies who came to Thiruvananthapuram from far away places for education and jobs. Besides giving her a modest monetary contribution, Guru gave Narayani-amma specific instructions required for establishing and developing the project. So, the first S.N.V. Sadanam, a hostel for women, was established in Thiruvananthapuram. Now Kerala boasts of a vast network of hostels for working women in all major cities. Many of them are operated under S.N.V. Sadanam, the institution founded by Narayani-amma.

Soon after Naani's marriage, Naani began to act abnormally. She showed disinterest in food and could not sleep. She talked like an insane person. Sometimes she would laugh loudly and sometime cry bitterly. She acted like a stranger towards her husband and expressed

a strong dislike for him. Nobody knew what the problem was. Many feared the poor girl was suffering from a mental disease. After some unsuccessful treatment attempts by local physicians, they decided to take Naani to Sivagiri hoping that Guru would cure the problem.

Guru quietly watched Naani for a while. He posed no questions. No treatment was prescribed. He said, "You all stay here for a few days." They did that, awaiting Guru's further directions. After a few days, Guru went to see them. Only Naani was there at that time.

Guru told her: "You are married. It is not moral or ethical to simply walk away from it. Try to love your husband and be happy. Go home peacefully and everything will be all right!"

Naani was taken aback by Guru's comments. She was unable to say anything in response.

After a day, the party returned to their home. Naani's behaviour surprised everyone in the family. She showed no signs of sickness. Her newfound love and care for her husband amused all. Out of curiosity, Narayani-amma asked her sister-in-law, "Naani, how did you get cured so fast?" In response, Naani revealed the truth that was hidden so far. She acknowledged that she had no disease at all, physically or mentally. She was only pretending as insane to avoid her husband. "Somehow, I couldn't like him", she admitted. Then she explained what Guru advised her while others were away.

"How was Guru able to see the hidden secret that was buried deep in her mind by merely looking into her eyes for a few moments?" They were puzzled.

Lifting a Hidden Talent

Sree Narayana Guru was on a visit to the coastal areas near Karunagappally in southern Kerala. The purpose of his visit was to consecrate two temples. To welcome Guru, a crowd of people assembled at Padanayarkulangara, including Ezhavas and Nairs. As Guru arrived, many rushed to see the sage. Some leaders who tried to manage the crowd lost control. A known local leader used a rude comment comparing people to "wild animals". Guru heard it. He was not pleased. Guru expressed his displeasure to him for being unkind

and inconsiderate. Guru then chose a comfortable place to sit, and people formed themselves a circle around him.

To enliven the crowd, Guru asked them, "Is any of you a good singer? A young man presented himself before Guru. He was the son of Oochira Raman Bhagavathar, an expert in traditional religious recitations. As everyone awaited a good performance, the man stood motionless for some time. Even though he tried his best, no sound escaped his lips. Nobody knew why. "The unwarranted pride in his skill was crossing all limits," a few commented.

He returned to the crowd, his head hung.

Guru then pointed his finger in the direction of a middle-aged man. He was Karimbil Padmanabhan Vadhyar, and he was not known to be a singer at all. Everyone was surprised at Guru's pick. While they anxiously waited for the poor man's response, Padmanabhan Vadhyar took out a piece of paper. It was a poem he wrote the previous night welcoming the spiritual master. That was his first serious attempt at writing. He was shy and was lacking in confidence in the quality of the work. He also seriously suspected his own ability to read it in public.

When Guru called him, he felt a newfound confidence and began to recite the poem in a melodious voice. It was so beautiful that everyone was moved. Padmanabhan Vadhyar received applause from everyone for his talent that was hidden until then.

As the poem ended, Guru told the crowd, "The welcome ceremony is over. Now you can all go home."

Padmanabhan Vadhyar was the only one who got the opportunity to address the crowd that day. The stalwarts of the community who were aspiring to display their leadership abilities had to hold their ambitions for another time.

The incident is a reminder that any talent is nothing but a gift of God and any such skill needs to be handled with humility.

Abandoning Mediator's Role

A serious dispute once occurred between two factions in an administrative body of a temple belonging to the Ezhava community

in Thiruvananthapuram. Because of the egoistic power play of a few, the once smoothly run temple became a silent victim of their arrogance. The negative atmosphere began to damage the bonds that had existed among individuals and families of the community. When the leaders pleaded for Guru's intervention, Guru consented hesitantly.

Guru went to the temple and called both the factions for a meeting. Each side presented their arguments forcefully. Accusations and counter-accusations were hurled. Guru silently heard the heated exchanges. Both sides hoped Guru would be on their side.

As the war of words continued, Guru noticed a group of people at the temple entrance. They came in large numbers when they heard about the arrival of Sree Narayan Guru and hoped to have a close view of the sage. The men, women and children had washed themselves, wore fresh clothes and had applied sacred ash over the forehead.

Guru was moved by their innocent appearance.

Curious, Guru asked one of the leaders, "Who are the people at the temple entrance? Why are they just standing there?"

The answer came quickly. Both warring factions said in chorus: "O' Swami! They are Pulayas."

"Call them in," Guru said.

"Swami, how can we allow the Pulayas inside our temple? Unthinkable!" The crowd inside the temple said in one voice.

Guru then called leaders of each group and asked their opinion. They both repeated the response.

Guru went into silence for a few minutes. Then, he calmly said, "Let me go now!"

"Swami, our dispute isn't solved!"

"Is that so? I do not see any disagreement at all. Both of you have now united."

No one said anything. They stood motionless, feeling uneasy.

Guru said, "You do not need any mediator to solve your problems."

After saying this, Guru immediately left the temple premises.

Soon after, the warring groups realized their folly. They willingly opened the temple doors to all.

Prayer for Shower

In 1889, there was a serious drought in southern Kerala, causing enormous suffering. Even though they patiently waited for a long time, no rain was in sight.

Sree Narayana Guru was resting at his ashram in Aruvippuram when people began to share their frustrations to Guru.

"Our crops have died. Even the mighty river Neyyar is drying up. There is a shortage even of drinking water. And there is no grass for our cows."

"We are all in agony, Swami. What can we do?"

Guru listened to their grievances. His heart was filled with pity and compassion for the victims of Nature's wrath.

Then he closed his eyes and remained in that state for a while. Guru was composing a hymn to Lord Shiva while in deep meditation.

Upon opening his eyes, he began to recite "*Artha-Nareeshwara Stavam*, a heartwrenching prayer pleading for the mercy of the Lord *Artha-Naareeshwara*. The Lord Siva in the *Artha-Naareeshwara* form is a unique depiction of a half male and half female body in which Lord Shiva shares the right half of the body as his devote wife goddess Parvati completes the other half. Lord *Artha-Nareeshwara* further symbolizes an inseparable image of God and Nature as goddess Parvathi represents the Nature. According to the traditional Indian belief, God acts through His female counterpart for the benefit of all creations. It is not surprising that Guru turned to this distinctive deity of compassion at that moment.

The hymn consists of five verses.

Those twenty lines in simple Malayalam epitomize the plight of all beings being scorched under the burning sun. The prayer was directed towards Lord Shiva, the most compassionate of all gods. The first four verses elaborate the pitiful state of people because of the drought. The last verse was a direct and forceful appeal to the Lord for immediate action.

"Go home peacefully? Rain will surely come," Guru told the devotees.

Barely two hours later, the sky began to turn dark. Giant clouds began to roll in. And in no time, rain arrived. The pounding rain

continued for hours. The Neyyar river began to overflow. Water was flowing everywhere and the earth was soaked in rain water.

Story of a Lucky Thief

Guru established many ashrams across Kerala. Two essential features of these ashrams were a beautiful vegetable garden and a nice farm. In the gardens, Guru and the inmates cultivated all kinds of vegetables. The farms usually had plenty of banana and plantain plants as well as an area for growing cassava (also known as tapioca). Since early childhood, he had enjoyed working in the farms and was always fascinated by nature.

While Guru was staying in the Aruvippuram Ashram in the 1890s, he planted a banana plant. It began to grow in a healthy way. Guru was very fond of the plant and took great care of it. In due time, it became mature and sprouted a relatively big cluster of flowers. Every inmate in the ashram had a special emotional attachment with this plant. It took another couple of months for the yield to fully develop. As everyone waited impatiently to enjoy the ripe fruit, to their great dismay, the bunch of bananas was found missing one morning.

Guru was then in Thiruvananthapuram when the theft occurred. Nobody knew what to do. "How would Guru respond to this?" That was on everyone's mind. There was no channel for immediate communication in those days. Soon a petition was filed with the royal police. The issue was also brought to the attention of the magistrate Padmanabhan Thampi, a devotee of Guru and a frequent visitor to the Aruvippuram Ashram. Hearing about the incident, he became very upset and urged the police to catch the thief immediately. The thief was caught and was brought into the court.

The proof was sufficient for an easy conviction. The charges were read and the magistrate was convinced. The court was adjourned for another day for additional legal procedures to nail the defendant. The magistrate had made up his mind on the verdict and this was passed on informally to the inmates of the ashram to calm them down. To avoid future thefts, the magistrate wished to announce a harsh verdict. Rumours were that the culprit was to be brought back to the courtyard of the Aruvippuram Ashram to receive of several lashes.

While Guru returned to Aruvippuram, people told him about the developments. They also happily informed him about the imposition of the punishment. To the surprise of everyone, after hearing all this, Guru became very depressed. He became gloomy on hearing that the man was going to be whipped at the courtyard of the ashram.

"No, I am returning right now! I do not want to live in a place where there is no forgiveness. The mind of *sanyasins* shall remain above desires and enmities. If this kind of behaviour is promoted, more severe and undesirable happenings can take place tomorrow. The whole atmosphere of the ashram will be polluted forever by the wailing of the unfortunate man. The air will not be suitable for *sanyasins* to inhale."

He left the area and moved into the home of a local devotee. Soon the inmates of the ashram, including his loyal disciple Kumaran Asan, were informed of Guru's feelings. They rushed to the magistrate and he agreed to withdraw the case. Afterwards, they all went to Guru, sought pardon and begged him to return to the ashram.

The poor thief was surprised to hear about the sudden turn of events in his favour. We can only assume the profound gratitude the man felt towards the compassionate Guru.

Advice to Ashram Inmate

There was a temple at Muttakkad in Thiruvananthapuram district under Guru's ownership. A few jackfruit trees stood near the temple. During seasons, those trees bore plenty of fruits. An average tree produces more than 30-40 fruits annually, each weighing around 40-50 pounds. The fruit is highly nutritious. One fruit is usually more than enough for a large family's whole day meal. Its strong timber helped build traditional homes in Kerala. The tree is considered very auspicious. Its wood is prescribed for fire rituals. Guru had a special liking for jackfruit tree. In all ashrams and temples founded by Guru, jackfruit trees are a permanent presence.

During one season, the inmates of the temple noticed a strange occurrence. Every morning they noticed that fruits were missing from the jackfruit trees. A few poor people lived near the temple and they

naturally became the suspects. One inmate, who was staying with Guru as a cook, noticed a man from the area stealthily wandering around the trees. It seemed he was trying to identify the ripe ones during daylight so that he could pluck them at night.

One morning he told Guru the whole story. He was sure Guru would do something that would end the thefts.

As the man awaited a response, Guru said compassionately: "Have you ever told him that walking in the dark through this place is dangerous? He could be bitten by a poisonous snake. Or he could get hurt in other ways. Why did you not tell him to come during day and take whatever he needs to sustain his family? O' you are indeed a heartless fellow! Please try to love him and advise him as I said."

The man was stunned into silence. He hung his face in shame and disappeared from Guru's sight.

Comforting a Grieving Widow

Sree Narayana Guru's daily chores usually began a few hours before the break of dawn. One such time, accompanied by Bhaigavan Vaidyer, a young inmate of Sivagiri Ashram, Guru was walking through the paths along the sides of the Varkala tunnel. The anguished wailing from a nearby home drew their attention. Realising something terrible had befallen the family, they hurried together to find out the reason for the misery. They were told that the head of the family had died in Singapore where he worked as a labourer. Guru understood from the conversations that the dead man was the sole breadwinner of the poor family.

Hearing the tragedy, Guru tried his best to console the family who were Muslim by faith. Guru engaged in a polite conversation with the widow.

Guru - Do you think the dead will return?

Widow ~ No.

Guru - Don't you know that we all will die one day?

Widow - Yes, I do.

Guru - Can wailing bring your dead back?

Widow - No.

Guru - Why are you wailing then?

Widow - Swami, I won't wail any longer (crying).

Guru - No more wailing. Wailing is not good for the dead soul.

Pray for their eternal peace.

(Widow stopped wailing immediately and then prostrated before Guru).

Guru - Have you got any children?

Widow - Yes.

Guru - Life needs to go on no matter what. Concentrate your efforts on the wellbeing of the children. Let them have a good education. Don't demoralize yourself, and try to stay close to God.

Guru then asked the lady to go and rest inside her private chambers.

How to Overcome Fear?

After offering words of comfort to the young widow and her family, Guru and Bhargavan resumed their walk. It was still dark. Young Bhargavan was feeling very uneasy after visiting the dead man's home. He seemed to be scared to walk in the dark as if haunted by some mysterious fear. Sensing Bhargavan's nervousness, Guru inquired: "Do you feel any fear?" Bhargavan said as long as he was with Guru, he was fine.

"Do you know what causes fear?" Guru asked. "No, I don't," Bhargavan replied.

Guru said: "Fear occurs when a person has the notion of duality. If you believe there exists nobody besides you, there is no room for fear. In fact, *advaita* is such a state of consciousness."

Bhargavan commented, "Guru, I do not get it."

"You have stated that you do not feel any fear as long as I am with you. Then the natural assumption is that there exists you and me. So, there are two people. But try to perceive that you alone exist.

If so, there shall not be a second person. The sense of duality or *dvaita* means that there exists a person who experiences fear and then another one who causes fear. There will be no fear if you really feel that every being is part and parcel of you. That experience is characterized as non-duality or *advaita*", Guru explained.

Bhargavan still didn't get it. It took him years of understanding to grasp that fear is fundamentally based on the notion of duality. When a person experiences a state of non-duality, fearlessness can be its natural outcome.

Three Great Visitors

Rabindranath Tagore and C.F. Andrews Visit Guru

It was in Sivagiri that Sree Narayana Guru received Rabindranath Tagore and C.F. Andrews. The historic meeting took place on 22nd November 1922. By then Tagore had become the pride of all Indians as he had won international acclaim by winning the Nobel Prize in literature (1913).

Even though Tagore was a contemporary of Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda, he was different from both in many ways. Like the ancient rishis, Tagore visualized "a world not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls". He was first a citizen of the world and only then considered himself an Indian. He always kept an open heart towards various cultures of the world and wholeheartedly admired many values of the West. He never allowed himself to be confined within a political or religious dogma. He remained an ideal

humanist throughout his life. While genuinely admiring the rich cultural heritage of India and its values, Tagore always strived to stay above the parochial notions of national or religious pride. By all standards, Tagore was one of the most progressive influences on modern India.

After Tagore won the Nobel Prize, a renewed interest in him and his work became a passion especially among educated Indians. P Natarajan, the son of Dr Palpu, was one among them {Natarajan later came to be known as Nataraja Guru and founded the Narayana Gurukula}. After sensing Guru's interest in Tagore, Natarajan collected and brought almost all the available works of Tagore to Guru. As a disciple and companion of Guru, he found time to read and explain their contents to Guru. As a result, Guru felt an affinity for Tagore. When they knew that Tagore was preparing for a tour in southern India, Guru deployed Natarajan to invite Tagore to the Sivagiri Ashram.

Many earlier biographers of Sree Narayana Guru were present at Sivagiri as the two great souls met for the first time. They have described the historic meeting in detail. Elaborate arrangements were made in Sivagiri to honor Tagore. Sivagiri was crowded with people to welcome the great poet. While everyone waited for the arrival of the guests, Guru was engaged in a discussion with poet Kumaran Asan. They were staying near the *Sarada Temple*. Guru abruptly ended the conversation, got up and went into another facility known as *Vaidika Madom*, a nearby structure used for conducting Vedic ritual practices. He entered a small room and closed its doors.

The scheduled time for Tagore's arrival had approached. Guru was still within closed doors and was immersed in meditation. The disciples, inmates and the organizers became anxious. They had to wait for Guru to open the door himself. As they were wondering what to do, a telegram arrived from C.F. Andrews who was accompanying Tagore. One of the organizers read it: "Tagore and other guests are on way to Sivagiri but will be late by an hour."

Without paying any attention to what was going on outside, Guru continued his meditation. Tagore and Andrews finally reached Sivagiri. Tagore came on a special cart and Andrews walked beside the cart.

"What to do? Who is going to inform Guru about the arrival of the guests? How can we tell the visitors to wait?"

The organizers were uneasy as both the guests walked towards *Vaidika Madom*. To their great relief, at the instance Tagore set his foot on the doorsteps of Guru's quarters, Guru opened the door. Tagore and Andrews immediately greeted Guru with folded hands. According to witnesses, Guru was radiant with spiritual energy. A divine glow emanated from his face.

Kumaran Asan placed three special mats near the door of *Vaidika Madom*. Tagore, Andrews and Guru sat on them. As salutation, Tagore said: "This unique moment of having your *darsan* has touched my heart."

They remained in silence for a while, looking at each other's eyes. Tagore opened the conversation. He stated his appreciation for the great work being done by Guru. After hearing Tagore, Guru commented, "I haven't done anything at all. And I do not think I will be able to do much in the future either. I sympathize with my inability." Some thought Guru was joking while many looked confused. But Tagore grasped the philosophical depth and sincerity in those words.

After the meeting, Tagore referred to Guru in glowing terms.

"I have been touring different parts of the world. During these travels, I have had the good fortune to come into contact with a number of saints and *rishis*. But I have frankly to admit that I have never come across with one who is spiritually greater than Swami Sree Narayana Guru of Kerala, nay a person who is on a par with him in spiritual attainment. I am sure, I shall never forget that radiant face illuminated with the self-effulgent light of divine glory, and those yogic eyes fixing their gaze on a far remote point in the distant horizon."

Mahatma Gandhi Visits Guru

Mahatma Gandhi visited Sivagiri Ashram and met Sree Narayana Guru on March 12, 1925. Gandhiji arrived at Sivagiri in the afternoon from Thiruvananthapuram after visiting the Regent Queen, the royal

ruler of the princely state. He was accompanied by a few prominent personalities including C. Rajagopalachari and E.V. Ramaswamy Naiker. The meeting took place at a building near the ashram donated to Guru by a devotee. The facility was renamed in honour of the Mahatma as Gandhi Ashram. The inside was decorated with nature-friendly materials. Pure white sea sand was spread all around the courtyard and on the pathways. A large crowd had gathered to welcome the humble sage-statesman. They were anxious to see the person who had won the hearts of friends and foes alike with his creed of non-violence.

Guru and his disciples received Gandhiji as he stepped out of the car. The devotees then performed traditional welcoming rituals for the guests. A mat made of dry grass was spread on the floor. Facing each other, both Guru and Gandhiji sat comfortably on a cotton pad that was placed on top of the mat. Gandhiji opened the conversation in English and inquired whether Guru knew English. N. Kumaran, a prominent legal professional, translated Gandhiji's question for Guru in Malayalam. Guru acknowledged he didn't know English. As Guru had a good command in Sanskrit, he asked Gandhiji, whether he knew Sanskrit. Though Gandhiji admired Sanskrit and advocated its study, he was lacking fluency in the language. So, Guru spoke in Malayalam while Gandhiji used English. The conversation went on for about an hour¹.

Gandhiji enquired Guru's opinions on various topics. They discussed Hinduism and untouchability, the mass agitation at Vaikom for securing the right of Ezhavas and other lower castes to use the streets around temples, the plight of Dalits and other untouchables, the relevance of non-violent protests, implications of religious conversions, and Hinduism's effectiveness for spiritual salvation. Guru's clarification on these subjects had a significant effect on later Gandhian thoughts.

The following is an excerpt of their conversation:

Gandhiji: Does Swamiji know whether untouchability has any basis in Hindu scriptures?

Guru: No.

Gandhiji: Does Swamiji have any difference of opinion in the way the Vaikom Satyagraha struggle is being conducted?

Guru: No.

Gandhiji: Does Swamiji propose any suggestion on improving or changing it?

Guru: No. My knowledge is that the movement is going on fine. There is no need to change anything now.

Gandhiji: To solve the plight of the untouchable communities, besides the removal of untouchability, what else are Swamiji's suggestions?

Guru: They require education and wealth. I do not insist on inter-caste marriages or inter-caste dining now. But they should have the same opportunities for improvement.

Gandhiji: I am hearing from some quarters that non-violent agitation cannot bring results and coercion is needed to secure rights. What is Swamiji's view?

Guru: I don't think use of force is a preferable alternative.

Gandhiji: Do Hindu scriptures prescribe use of force?

Guru: *Puranas* have depictions on the requirement of use of force. Kings and other royals used it to fulfill their duties and responsibilities. For common people, the use of force is not at all advisable in any circumstance.

Gandhiji: Some people express the opinion that religious conversion is required as it is the way for freedom and liberation. Do Swamiji agree?

Guru: Those who were converted appeared to be gaining freedom. When such benefits are noticed, people may think positively of conversion. They can't be blamed for that.

Gandhiji: For spiritual liberation, does Swamiji think that Hindu religion is adequate?

Guru: Other religions also have provision for spiritual liberation.

Gandhiji: Let us put other religions aside. Is Hindu religion adequate for spiritual liberation in Swamiji's view?

Guru: Hindu religion is surely apt for spiritual liberation. Naturally the preference is for material liberation.

Gandhiji: I also sympathize with the problems caused by untouchability. Besides that, does Swamiji feel that religious conversion is essential for spiritual liberation?

Guru: Religious conversion is not at all needed for spiritual liberation.

Gandhiji: As you know, we are determined in making material freedom a reality. Our goal can't go unrealized, can it?

Guru: It may be realized one day. As its hold is so intense, the feeling is that Mahatmaji needs to take another birth for fulfilling it.

Gandhiji: (Laughing) I am sure to achieve that goal in my lifetime. I heard that untouchability is being practiced among the lower caste communities too. Are all admitted into Swamiji's temples?

Guru: Everyone is admitted. The children who belong to the Pulaya and Paraya communities are living in the Sivagiri ashram as one family, learning, praying and dining together.

Gandhiji: So glad to hear that.

Gandhiji's Overnight Stay

After the conversation was over, to stay for the night, Gandhiji went to the Ashram quarters. The ashram was a few feet away from the building where they had the meeting. A unique facility known as Vaidic Mutt was specially arranged for his comfortable stay. He was very much impressed by the cleanliness, spiritual beauty and serenity that were evident everywhere in the ashram.

During that evening Gandhiji participated in the prayer service at the Sarada Mutt. Gandhiji was touched by the simplicity of the spiritual service at the shrine of Goddess Sarada. After attending the prayer, he returned to Vaidic Mutt and listened to the evening recital of devotional readings and chanting of the Upanishad mantras by children. Gandhiji was pleased by the beauty in the chanting of Sanskrit mantras by the young boys. He was mesmerized and perplexed when he found out that many among the children were from the most despised community of Dalits known as Parayas.

It appeared that Gandhiji had to come all the way to the spiritual abode of Guru to witness for the first time the chanting of Sanskrit mantras by Dalits. Gandhiji was sure that such a phenomenon existed almost nowhere in India. As those *Paraya* boys recited the Malayalam hymn *Daivadasakam* in melodious voice, Gandhiji listened very attentively. The sense of awe and admiration Gandhiji felt as he learned that *Daivadasakam* was a composition of Sree Narayana Guru and was written specifically for those young *Dalit* inmates as an ideal prayer, was evident on his face. When the prayers and readings were over, Gandhiji took time to interact with the children. Captivated by the mystical pull of *Daivadasakam*, Gandhiji inquired about its meaning.

Gandhiji remained in the Vaidic Mutt for the night. Early next morning Guru walked to Vaidic Mutt to see Gandhiji and exchanged pleasantries. Afterwards, they proceeded together to attend the morning prayer services at the Sarada Mutt, the shrine of Goddess Sarada.

After the morning rituals, Guru and Gandhiji engaged in a debate that had a profound impact on Gandhiji's outlook towards the caste system. Beyond doubt, Gandhiji always believed that the practice of untouchability and the caste-associated injustices were wrong and immoral. However, until the meeting with Guru, Gandhiji was convinced that *Chathur-vamya* and the distinctions based on caste was part of a natural order. So, he didn't seem to have any problem in accepting caste as a fact of life. To further validate his concept on the *Varna* system, Gandhiji pointed to a mango tree in front of the *pamasala* where they were staying. According to Gandhiji, just as the leaves of the mango tree were of different colours and size, society also naturally constituted of people of varying distinctions.

Guru agreed with Gandhiji that the leaves of the same mango tree were different in size and colours. Similarly, people within a society had differing superficial features. But Guru pointed out that, in the case of the mango tree, the external appearance of its leaves directly depended upon the surrounding environment such as availability of sunlight. More profoundly, Guru clarified that regardless of the physical attributes of the leaves, its essence would be the same if we squeeze and taste its juice. Guru then stated that despite outward

differences, the underlying attributes of each human being permeated all peripheral differences such as caste, race, religion or nationality. Being a genuine searcher of truth, Gandhiji wholeheartedly grasped Guru's vision and promised to work for its fulfilment.

Gandhiji returned from Guru's abode a changed man, and soon included eradication of caste as a core programme of the Indian National Congress. Gandhiji also renamed his publication *Navajivan* as *Harijan*, meaning Children of God, to express his solidarity with the cause of the so-called untouchable masses. Gandhiji admired Guru greatly. He admitted, "I feel it as the greatest privilege in my life to have visited the state of Travancore and to have the *darsan* of the venerable sage Sree Narayana Guru."

Two Losses (1924)

Tragic Death of Kumaran Asan

While Sree Narayana Guru was spearheading the socio-religious reformation in Kerala, it was Kumaran Asan who extended that role to the literary field of Malayalam.-During his many years as the loyal disciple of Guru as well as his fifteen years tenure as the first General Secretary of the S.N.D.P. Yogam, Asan was at the forefront of many socio-political struggles to obtain basic human rights for the marginalized communities.

Until the time of Kumaran Asan, Malayalam literature was more or less centered on the lives of upper castes or royal classes. To the writers before Asan, literature was a medium to express their scholarship. The skill was mainly aimed at pleasing those who held

power. It was Kumaran Asan who revolutionized modern Malayalam literature by placing for the first time the ordeals of the traditionally marginalized as the subject of his poems. Besides, his poems are replete with the eternal philosophical themes of life. The power of love uncontaminated by material desires and the ideals of humanism are hallmarks of Asan's poetry. He spearheaded a radical and intellectual transformation in many arenas of public life. The people in Kerala regard Kumaran Asan as the first genuine poet of the masses.

In his classic work *Veena-poove* (1908), Kumaran Asan discusses philosophical themes to describe life and love. In *Nalini* (1911) and *Leela* (1914), two other major works, he talks about true and genuine love between man and woman, free from the passion of flesh. It was the first time such a dignified concept of love was presented in Malayalam literature. Also, for the first time, a person like *Chathan*, a Dalit youth, appeared as a hero in Kumaran Asan's book of poem *Duravastha* (1922). In *Chandala-bhiskhuki* (1922), another poem by Asan, a Dalit woman, Matangi, is presented as the heroine. In *Karuna* (1923) a prostitute is the heroine. In both *Chandala-bhiskhuki* and *Duravastha*, the central theme is the hollowness of the caste system. Those poems express the righteous anger of the writer against the institution of caste. Asan's poetry reveals his special affinity towards the noble and ethical ideals of Buddha.

His untimely death at the age of fifty-one during the early morning hours of January 17, 1924 in a boat tragedy was an irreparable loss not only to Malayalam literature but also to the progressive social movements of Kerala. Besides being an accomplished poet and a known social activist, Kumaran Asan also made his mark as a legislator, public speaker, editor, publisher as well as entrepreneur. He authored the first but, unfortunately, incomplete biography of Guru. Guru always had special love for Kumaran Asan. While many friends and supporters distanced themselves from him when he decided to end ascetic life to marry at the age of forty-five, Guru respected Asan's decision and blessed the couple.

The tragedy occurred while Kumaran Asan was on a trip to Aluva, around two hundred miles away from his home, to attend a business meeting of a company in which he was a shareholder. On the morning of January 16, he left his home in Thonnakkal in the district of

Thiruvananthapuram and went to Sivagiri to see Guru, his mentor, benefactor and above all his god in human form. It was customary for him to visit Guru and seek his blessings before embarking on any long journey. Unfortunately, Guru was meditating behind closed doors when Kumaran Asan reached there.

He waited for an extended period but the meditation continued beyond the usual time that day. Kumaran Asan had to go to Murukkumpuzha to catch a train to Kollam and then ride a boat to Alappuzha to reach the final destination. So, he hesitantly left the ashram without seeing Guru. But Asan entrusted a *sanyasin* disciple to pass his obeisance to Guru. Within a few minutes, Guru opened his doors, the *sanyasin* informed Guru about Kumaran Asan's arrival and departure, the sage remarked prophetically: "Kumaran has gone".

It was around 9 PM of January 16, 1924 when *The Redeemer*, the boat carrying Kumaran Asan, left the port in Kollam for Alappuzha. The boat had a seating capacity of about ninety but that night around three hundred people boarded it. The sailing was smooth as the waterway was calm and there was plenty of moonlight. After a few hours of journey, the boat reached Kayamkulam and more people boarded it. As the vessel continued its journey to Alappuzha, it was hit by heavy rains and strong winds. By around 5 in the morning, the boat made a fateful turn at Pallana, less than twenty miles before Alappuzha, and capsized due to overload. Some of the victims were rescued but Kumaran Asan was not among the survivors. Kerala was in shock as his body was found in the Pallana river.

Today, at Pallana, there exists a magnificent memorial *Mandapa* and other facilities dedicated to Kumaran Asan including a library and a school. The body of the *Maha-Kavi* or great poet was buried there.

Mahasamadhi of Chattampi Swami

Chattampi Swamikal was a contemporary of Sree Narayana Guru and they cherished a fraternal relationship that lasted a life time. Chattampi Swamikal authored many scholarly books and was an intellectual force against superstitious beliefs. His books include

Pracheena Malayalam, which in length discusses the history of the land of Kerala and its original inhabitants. *Vedathikara Niroopanam*, another book by him, is considered his masterpiece. It systematically questions the exclusive claims of Brahmins over the study of *Vedas* and refutes the Brahminical authority. Besides being a scholar, Chattambi Swamikal was an accomplished *siddha* and a yogi. It was widely believed that he possessed mystical powers or *siddhis* through his *upasana* of Lord *Subramanya*.

These two contemporaries possessed many common traits. Both were scholars to the core. As seekers of Truth, they had identical goals. Their support for each other during their spiritual pursuits was exceptionally cordial. Both were fascinated by the Tamil-Saiva traditions and implicitly expressed their allegiance to the cultural traits of the Dravidian heritage. As fearless and free souls, both stood against the evil tendencies of the day. Both were vehemently opposed to the caste system. They rejected the exclusive claim of Brahmins to study and interpret India's traditional Vedic wisdom.

Chattambi Swamikal was merciless in refuting philosophic or spiritual matters he disagreed with. On many occasions, he bluntly advocated his strong positions on matters of caste, religion and reformation. As far as the orthodox character and superstitious attitudes of Kerala in those days were concerned, Swamiji's outright calls for change, often filled with righteous anger, seemed to be ineffective in achieving the intended impact in the society.

He was born in a Nair family but the Nair community then was hesitant to acknowledge him as their spiritual or religious guide. On the social front, his liberal views on caste did not go down well with the predominant habits of the conservative Nair community. Caste conscious Nairs considered him an outcast. Even many close relatives preferred to disassociate themselves from him. He chided the Nair community for being subservient to the Brahmins at the cost of their self-respect and dignity. Chattambi Swamikal was alluding to the controversial sexual rights of Brahmin males over Nair women. He was appalled by the attitudes of the Nair-chieftains who viewed the insulting practice as an honour rather than a humiliation.

The intimacy between Chattambi Swamikal and Guru lasted until the *Mahasamadhi* of Chattambi Swamikal on May 5, 1924. Often,

Chattambi Swamikal affectionately addressed Guru as *Naanan*. Guru called him *Chattambi*. They met each other while both were young ascetics. Shortly after, Chattambi Swami led Guru to Thycat Ayyavu Swami, the foremost yoga master of the time. Both tread their spiritual paths separately for the next many years. They resumed their cordial relationship after the return of Guru to the midst of people as a realized soul.

While remaining close, both ascetics displayed fundamental differences as far as philosophy and personality were concerned. Chattambi Swami was generally perceived as an extrovert by nature. Guru displayed the character traits of an introvert. Guru preferred a non-confrontational style as far as possible and favored a reconciliatory approach in resolving differences. Guru was always soft-spoken and often responded with wit or intelligent humour to counter a disagreeable view.

To a certain extent, Chattambi Swamikal remained a solitary spiritual mystic and a lonely crusader of truth. His disdain for engaging in organized social movements was known. On one occasion, Chattambi Swamikal jokingly raised a mocking question at Guru on the extent of his involvement in the society. He was attempting to alert Guru on the potential spiritual costs because of his extensive social involvement. In India's long spiritual traditions, realized souls usually keep a wide distance from the greater society.

In early 1924, a few months before Chattambi Swami's mortal departure, Guru visited him. Chattambi Swami was unwell and was staying at the home of a liberal Nair family in Prakkulam in the coastal town of Karunagappally. Guru was in the area for a fund collection for a school.

After the exchange of pleasantries, Chattambi Swami commented: "My perception is that now-a-days you are too immersed in action." Of course, Chattambi Swami was referring to the active social involvement of Guru among the destitute communities. Those words also implied his distaste towards social activism of ascetics. Guru responded, "Yes, the action is there but the doer is absent." Guru, while acknowledging his social involvement, was conveying in unequivocal terms that this was not at the cost of his ascetic principles.

Disregarding the weakness of his body, Chattambi Swami engaged in a hearty conversation with Guru. To please Chattambi Swami, Guru asked Sangeetha Swami, an expert musician who was with him, to sing classical songs. Chattampi Swami, though tired, seemed to enjoy it the most.

Within a few months, Chatambi Swami attained Mahasamadhi. Upon hearing about the mortal departure of his spiritual soul-mate, Guru compiled a poem. It is reminiscent of the virtues of Chatambi Swamikal as a *SadGuru* or ideal mentor. Today, a great ashram at Panmana, near the southern city of Kollam, stands as an eternal monument to the memory of Chattambi Swamikal. The location was chosen by Chattambi Swami as his final physical resting place months before his *Samadhi*.

Asia's First Parliament of Religions (1924-25)

“What does India Require Today?” Guru's Answer

The Adwaita Ashram at Alwaye earned wide acclaim as a result of a grand gathering of scholars representing various religions on March 3 and 4 in 1924 during *Shivarathri*. This independently organized event was visualized by Sree Narayana Guru as a Second World Parliament of Religions. The first World Parliament of Religions took place in 1893 in Chicago where Swami Vivekananda attended as a representative of Hinduism. The gathering in Aluva was also the first such attempt in Asia. .

Guru was convinced that the misunderstandings between religions was the prime cause of most human conflicts. When each religion nurtures the belief that the faith and theology advocated by it is

unique and perfect, conflicts are bound to happen. To remedy this problem, Guru prescribed mutual understanding among religions. He offered the view that religions represent a yearning by different people at different times to understand the divine.

As Guru was planning the conference, the socio-religious atmosphere of Kerala was far from calm. On one side, the wounds from the *Mappila Lahala*, the violent riot that took place in the Malabar region of north Kerala in 1921, were still fresh in the minds of many Hindus. The *Mappila Lahala* took Kerala by storm. The two prominent religious communities of Kerala, Hindus and Muslims, were estranged to a degree as a result. The British authorities crushed the armed rebellion with an iron fist. The *Mappila Lahala* began as a rebellion to redress the unjust agrarian practices but turned into a full scale riot fuelled by religious fanaticism.

On the other side, the ruthless caste system was effectively suppressing the basic human rights of the downtrodden Hindus. Ironically, the conservatives among upper caste Hindus had no objections in allowing such rights to those "lower castes" who were converting to other religions. As a result, a huge chunk of the "untouchable" population switched their allegiance from Hinduism to other faiths.

On the religious scene, Hinduism was largely immersed in apathy. Nationally, a few reformative movements were active among the Hindus to bring social changes but they seemed to fall short of the aspirations of the needy. The British took advantage of the existing frictions between Hindus and Muslims to perpetuate the British Raj. The Indian National Congress was predominantly led by upper caste Hindus while the Muslim League tried to unite the Muslims. Communalism was on the rise.

It was in such an environment that the idea of the first ever all-religion meet in Asia was conceived by Guru. He had definite solutions to the problems originating from religious conflicts. In the following diagnosis Guru explicitly defined the problem and offered its solution. "During Lord Buddha's time *Himsa* or violence was gaining momentum. So, Buddha gave prominence to the value of *Ahimsa* or non-violence. When Jesus Christ came, the society was lacking love, and Jesus promoted the virtues of love. Prophet Muhammed lived in

a society that needed the lessons of true brotherhood and because of that Islam gave importance to fraternity. What does India require today?" Guru also gave the answer: "Relief from competition and conflict between castes and religions!"

Not to Argue and Win, but to Know and to Make Known

The religious conference was planned to cultivate a genuine understanding and mutual reverence among religions. Guru declared the following slogan as the motto of the conference: "Not to argue and win, but to know and to make known". He believed that religions can coexist with peace and harmony. A study of the basic scriptures of different religions and a basic understanding of the fundamental tenets of various religions were prescribed by Guru as prerequisites for cultivating a healthy coexistence of religions. It was with this goal that Guru organized the religions conference in Alwaye. . In doing so, Guru proposed the noble ideals of Indian secularism long before India became independent and adopted a constitution for a social, democratic and secular republic.

The welcome speech was delivered by Swami Satyavrathan and it was unique for several reasons. Swami Satyavrathan was not only Guru's close disciple and caretaker of the Adwaita Ashram but also the chief organizer of the conference. He was a great scholar, an excellent and passionate orator and was committed to the cause of Guru.

The central theme of the speech symbolized the philosophy of universal fraternity and unity espoused by Guru. It reflected an objective analysis of the global realities and called for a genuine and collective attempt towards mutual understanding among religions. The speech was an expert overview on religion, history, politics, economy, science, psychology, philosophy, ethics and more. The following passage epitomized the profound religious philosophy of Guru: "In Swami Vivekananda's view, the religion of India will remain incomplete unless a fusion takes place by integrating the heart of Buddha with the brain of Sankara. Sree Narayana Guru's revision

takes the concept further. With the goal of ensuring global harmony, Guru maintains that without integrating the wisdom of the Hindus, Buddha's compassion, Christ's love and Muhammad's brotherhood, the universal religion of humanity will not take shape."

The meet was well represented by various sects of Hindu, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist and Jain religious scholars. Guru's gracious presence throughout the event was a blissful inspiration for the attendees. The highlight of the event was the reading of a declaration prepared by Guru for the occasion and it was read by Swami Satyavartan. It stated that as all religions of the world have common goals, there was no reason for conflict among them. A unique institution for learning all religions of the world in equal regard was envisioned by Guru as a solution to further the goals of the religious parliament.. He announced his plan to build such an instimtinn at his ashram in Sivagiri.

Vaikom Satyagraha (1925)

(Agitation for Walking Rights on Public Roads)

Historical Overview

It is very hard for the present generation to comprehend that "lower caste" people in many regions of Kerala were not free to use the public streets until around nine decades ago. Ezhavas and other lower castes, including Dalits, were branded as "untouchables" by the privileged communities. As a result, they were banned from walking on public pathways. The superstitious edicts were sanctioned and implemented by the ruling Hindu kingdom of Travancore. The powerful conservative members of the upper castes communities

desired no change in the status quo. The shameful situation had persisted for more than a thousand years in Kerala. "Lower caste" people had to endure severe hardships because of this prohibition on the freedom of movement.

A horrific event that occurred near the Lord Siva Temple at Vaikkom in 1798 was a stark evidence of the cruel face of casteism. Like many other places in Kerala, "lower caste" people were barred from not only entering the Vaikkom temple but also using the public streets around it. There were numerous signboards posted by authorities around the temple identifying the entry limits for *Ezhavas* and *Dalits*. If a person from "lower caste" encroached the forbidden *theendapad* limit, the temple was assumed to be polluted. A costly ritual was then necessary to undo the "harm".

Defying this absurd edict, a group of "untouchable" men under the leadership of Karippanicker, Kunnel Chenni, Otai Mandathelinkal and Maluthandar declared their intention to enter the Vaikkom temple. Since the temple was under the jurisdiction of the kingdom of Travancore, the king's men, were determined to punish the Ezhava youths who vowed to enter the temple. As the young men approached the eastern entrance of the temple, armed militia under the direction of *Dalawa* Kunchukutti Pillai, the then chief minister of the king, began brutally attacking the unarmed youths. The bodies of those who died were buried in a nearby pond.

The pond was notoriously nicknamed as *Dalawa Kulam* or "pond of *Dalawa*" by the locals as a reminder to the horrendous crime. Unfortunately, the pond no longer exists. The site was filled in and a bus station was later built in its place as an apparent attempt to erase the past.

Fortunately, the sacrifice of the young Ezhavas was not forgotten. The memory of the tragic event was instrumental in keeping alive the flame of struggle for equality and dignity among future generations. Vaikkom came to the spotlight again in the 1920s as it became the center of the first systematically organized peaceful agitation or Satyagraha in Kerala. The objective of the Vaikkom Satyagraha was to obtain the freedom of movement on the streets around the Vaikkom temple for people belonging to the Hindu lower castes.

Leadership of T.K. Madhavan

Without doubt, it was Sree Narayana Guru's involvement in the social scene of Kerala that triggered the acceleration of awakening among the masses against many such suffocating practices. As a result, in many regions of Kerala, people began to organize themselves. While Dr Palpu, the legendary humanist of Kerala, took the lead at the end of the 19th century to bring the social realities of southern India to international attention, another protege of Guru, T.K. Madhavan, initiated the process of taking the human rights issues of Kerala to national attention in the first quarter of the 20th century. As a devotee of Guru and as the most effective leader of the Ezhava community, Madhavan took the center stage in the Vaikom Satyagraha.

Ezhava leaders had been demanding the freedom to walk through the streets near the Vaikom temple since 1905. Kumaran Asan, the legendary poet and social activist, made many moving speeches about the plight of untouchables in the *Sree Moolam Praja Sabha*, the royal legislative council, but the authorities stubbornly ignored their repeated pleas. It was in such a circumstance that Madhavan came to the leadership of the Ezhava community. Madhavan hailed from an aristocratic Ezhava family in Karthikappally, in the coastal district of Alappuzha. Even though Madhavan's family was rich, he also had to face numerous humiliating experiences as an Ezhava. By taking Guru's message "Be strong through organization" to heart, Madhavan formed a few activist groups and successfully intervened in various local issues. His exceptional organizing capacity and oratory skills won him many admirers. When Madhavan became the general secretary of S.N.D.P. Yogam, he significantly expanded its base and turned it into a massive liberation movement in Kerala.

Madhavan founded the newspaper *Desabhimani* in 1917. It published numerous articles and news reports on the injustices suffered by the untouchable communities in Kerala. Madhavan became a member of the *Sree Moolam Praja Sabha* (the royal legislative council of Travancore) in 1918. He tried to get permission to present a petition in the forum for the right to use public streets around the Vaikom temple for all people. He was not only denied the right to

present his argument but received an insulting response from the royal authorities. He decided to take the fight to national attention.

The Involvement of Indian National Congress

Madhavan met Mahatma Gandhi on September 23, 1921 at Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu. By then Gandhiji was the foremost leader of the Indian National Congress and the face of the Indian independence movement.

Madhavan convincingly argued for including the issue of untouchability as a prime agenda of the Indian National Congress. He explained the plight of untouchables in Kerala. Gandhi agreed to follow up the matter with the regional committee of the Congress. With Guru's blessings, Madhavan attended the Kakkina session of the Congress in 1923. He presented a resolution seeking the inclusion of eradication of untouchability as a programme of the Congress. His attempt was successful. Gandhi endorsed the view that to deserve political freedom, India as a society had to abolish inhumane customs such as untouchability.

The Congress formed a committee in 1924 for initiating activities for abolishing untouchability. It asked the royal government to remove the ban on lower castes from using the public roads around the Vaikom temple. To achieve the objective, they adopted a non-violent method of *Satyagraha* as prescribed by Gandhi. The *Satyagraha* or passive civil resistance was introduced as a method to fight injustice by Gandhi while in South Africa. The Vaikom Satyagraha was the first testing ground for the new method in Kerala.

The mass agitation at Vaikom began under the leadership of the state unit of the Indian National Congress on March 23, 1924 and Madhavan became its *de facto* leader and chief organizer. The participants in the movement were advised to endure all hardships during the struggle. They were strictly told to refrain from any provocation or counter response. The intention of the *Satyagraha* was to generate a moral awakening and mental change among the upper castes and royal government against the blatant injustice suffered by the untouchable communities in Kerala.

During the movement, the volunteers had to endure violent assault by the royal administrators and other fanatic groups. The *Satyagraha* encountered many testing moments. Madhavan too was subjected to severe physical abuse by the royal police. Madhavan along with other prominent leaders were imprisoned. When the *Satyagraha* looked like it was about to die, E.V. Ramaswami Naiker, the founder of the Dravidian movement, arrived from Tamil Nadu with his wife and sister and took charge. The *Satyagraha* continued. He too was imprisoned twice. Then came the involvement of women leaders in the struggle. More supporters from around the country including Akalis from Punjab arrived in Vaikom to support the *Satyagraha*.

Sree Narayana Guru's Blessings

The Vaikom Satyagraha had the blessings of Guru. He offered Velur Mutt, his ashram in the area, for the use of the volunteers. Guru aided the movement financially too with a big contribution. He also installed a "donation collection box" in Sivagiri Ashram to further help the *Satyagraha*. He instructed his followers to visit the homes of supporters to spread the message of the movement and to collect funds for its smooth running.

Guru also deputed a few loyal disciples to volunteer for the movement in various capacities. The sage visited the *Satyagraha ashram* on September 27, 1924 to inspire the volunteers and stayed with them for two days. On September 28, Guru presided over a prayer meeting. A large crowd assembled there to greet Guru and to pay obeisance, and Guru prayed for the well-being of Mahatma Gandhi. As a yogi, Guru's way was lonely meditation. It was the first time Guru was seen praying in public. Guru's disciple Swami Satyavrata made a moving speech.

Guru's motive for backing the Vaikom Satyagraha was different from that of Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress. While Gandhi viewed the struggle as a religious issue and an internal matter of Hindus, the *Satyagraha* was more like a political issue to the Congress. But Guru viewed the *Satyagraha* in the context of a humanitarian issue. The primary goal of the Vaikom Satyagraha was for gaining the freedom to use the streets around the temple for the lower castes. Even a call for

securing entry into the conventional temples was not a realistic demand in the 1920s in Kerala. Such was the state of the caste-ridden society.

Vaikkom Satyagraha and Mahatma Gandhi

As the Vaikkom Satyagraha continued without any peaceful resolution in sight, Gandhi felt that the support of moderate members within the Hindu upper caste would improve the situation. With Gandhi's blessing a procession began from Vaikkom on November 1, 1924 under the leadership of Mannathu Padmanabhan, the foremost leader of the upper caste Nair community. Their objective was to express their solidarity with their lower caste brethren and to convince the royal rulers the need to change the unjust laws prohibiting freedom of movement. On the way to Thiruvanthapuram, they visited the Sivagiri Ashramam and sought the blessings of Sree Narayana Guru.

Even though the procession began with the participation of around five hundred upper caste men, as it reached Thiruvanthapuram on November 12, 1924, it swelled to more than five thousand people. A massive public meeting was held to declare the support of the upper caste Hindus. A memorandum signed by around twenty-five thousand moderate *savamas* or upper caste Hindus were submitted to the royal authorities the next day. The royal ruler of Travancore kingdom agreed to present the resolution in the royal legislature for approval. It was defeated by one vote. Soon the situation became worse. The conservative upper caste gangs organized themselves to attack and defeat the movement with a renewed vengeance. Gandhi intervened and urged the British to check the atrocities. Eventually, the violence was subdued and negotiations began.

Gandhiji came to the *Satyagraha ashram* on March 9, 1925 on a two-day visit. Gandhi went to the home of Indanthuruthu Namboothiri to seek a compromise as the upper caste leader refused to meet him at the *Satyagraha ashram*. Gandhi was further insulted as he was denied admission inside the residence citing "impurity" because of his association with the untouchables. Even though Gandhi discussed the matter for almost three hours and proposed a list of options to resolve the differences, none was acceptable to Namboothiri.

The meeting failed as Namboothiri argued that *Karma* or the earned sin of past lives was the reason for the suffering of "untouchables". Moreover, he made an attempt to persuade Gandhiji to withdraw his support to the movement. Unfortunately, Gandhiji was unable to convince the old man of the folly of his views.

Gandhiji's visit cheered up the Satyagraha participants and his presence at Vaikom was a morale booster to them. After leaving Vaikom, Gandhi visited the royal rulers of Travancore and talked to Queen Sethu Lakshmi Bai on March 11, 1925. Gandhiji came to the Sivagiri Ashram on the next day to meet Guru.

The ban on the freedom to walk around the Vaikom temple continued. Even though the Travancore royal government was forced to withdraw the notorious provisions, the order was ignored by its officials. It took many more months for the authorities to fully implement the withdrawal of the centuries-old ban. The Vaikom Satyagraha formally ended on November 23, 1925.

Vaikom Satyagraha in International Limelight

The Vaikom Satyagraha received renewed international attention recently because of a book published by an American author. Mary Elizabeth King in her book, *The Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability* (Oxford University Press, 2015), critically evaluated the effectiveness of the movement in achieving its objectives. She further took a controversial approach regarding the role of Mahatma Gandhi in the Vaikom Satyagraha. Even though the author credits Gandhiji for influencing many global struggles for human rights through peaceful means, she believes that in the context of the social realities of southern India, Gandhiji's approach had impaired the momentum of the marginalized communities in effectively acting against the unjust system that existed at that time.

It appears that the author's western orientation, research based knowledge and rational approach contributed in forming her assumptions on the Vaikom Satyagraha. According to many critics, King's view of the movement as a failure is flawed as it fails to take into consideration many ground realities of that time. In fact, contrary to her conclusion, the movement generated a great deal of

goodwill, cooperation and understanding among the various hitherto estranged communities.

Moreover, the movement's adherence to strictly peaceful means helped to avoid potentially explosive confrontations and undesired bloodshed. As an objective critic, Mary Elizabeth King is of the opinion that Gandhiji's principles cannot be taken as a magic medicine fitting all illnesses, and to keep its vitality and relevance, those principles have to be assessed and modified based on the context of time, place and social realities.

Travel and Tribulations (1926)

Every divine personality who appeared among the people from time to time had to endure varying degrees of trials and tribulations. According to *Puranas*, Lord Krishna's life was filled with challenges which began even before his birth and continued until his bodily departure by the arrow of a hunter. The life of Buddha, Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad were no exceptions. In modern times also, Sree Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi and many other sages and seers faced painful experiences. They were willing to pay the price for taking birth to serve humanity.

As an enlightened yogi and a selfless *sanyasin*, Sree Narayana Guru was beyond the effects of disturbances resulting from internal or external influences. Yet as a human being he also endured certain experiences that were not so pleasant. A series of such experiences occurred while he went on a trip to Tamil Nadu in September 1926.

Guru had sensed some uneasiness and internal bickering among his sanyasin disciples; this prompted him to travel to Tamil Nadu allowing them the opportunity to settle the problems themselves.

Guru's 70th birthday was celebrated widely in many regions of Kerala. Soon after, in the first week of September 1926, Guru along with a few close disciples embarked on a trip to Tamil Nadu. They traveled through Ambasamudram and stayed on the banks of the river Thamrapami for a few days. Later, they proceeded to an ancient village, Thiruppuramkundram. From there he left for a forested area, Muttayarassu, as there was an old temple there. Guru knew about the temple and the location was cool and serene. As word spread, Tamil devotees arrived with offerings such as fruits as far as from Madurai to have a *darsan* of Guru. *Sanyasin* heads of religious orders as well as social and political leaders also came to meet him. Guru was invited to many families and they received him with reverence and devotion.

As Guru was visiting a nearby village, Kunnakkudi, he noticed a dilapidated temple. There had been no rain in the area for a long time. The people were suffering due to scarcity of water. A few devotees requested Guru's divine help to solve their hardships and drew his attention to the temple. It was a *Ganapati* temple. Guru asked them to offer coconuts to the deity to get rains. As the devotees agreed, Guru assured them heavy rains would follow. A few hours later, it began to rain. Heavy rains continued till the next day. Everyone in the village was elated. The devotees brought thousands of coconuts to the temple as offering to the deity and broke them ceremoniously in devotion. As devotees began to pray at the temple regularly, it was no longer neglected.

From there Guru traveled to Thirupedakam near Madurai. He planned to rest at a mansion of a wealthy devotee. Unfortunately, the guard did not arrive with the key on time. So, Guru proceeded to the home of another Brahmin devotee for the night. Guru left the place by foot early in the morning along with a disciple. Guru felt weak as he developed uneasiness in the stomach. Even though Guru was tired, they walked nearly two miles before taking a bath in a river. Wearing wet clothes, they resumed the journey but Guru felt too weak to walk. He sat under a tree for a while. It was an isolated area surrounded by paddy fields. The Vaigai river was flowing nearby.

They had not had a meal and Guru and his companion felt hungry. A few hours passed, and other disciples reached the spot with dry clothes and food. After taking food, Guru continued to rest under the tree.

Soon heavy rains lashed the area. The atmosphere became chilly. Guru held on to the tree as close as possible to escape the heavy charge of rain water. Guru's clothes were soaked and he was shivering. A disciple was somehow able to obtain an umbrella. Guru along with others began to walk despite the rain towards the nearest railway station. Even though Guru was weak, he walked, occasionally cracking jokes about their plight. To make him comfortable, his disciples hired a bullock cart but Guru refused to board it.

As the rain intensified, they took shelter in an area meant for travelers. It was not only crowded but also unclean. The foul smell was unbearable to Guru. He went to a corner and sat down, covering himself in his wet cloth. Bowing down to pressure from the disciples, he hesitantly agreed to leave the place and boarded the bullock cart that was following them. But soon the cart was caught in an accident. The drivers of both carts began to use abusive language. Guru left the cart immediately and began to walk again. They finally reached the railway station but had to wait for an hour for a train to Madurai. The station didn't have even basic facilities for waiting travelers. A small bench was obtained for Guru to sit. But it began to rain again. Guru had to leave the station as it had no roof. They found a small shrine but it was too small for all of them. Guru managed to stay inside while others stood outside in the rain.

By the time Guru returned to the railway station, the train had departed. He had to go to a devotee's home for the night. Guru and his disciples finally reached Madurai the next day.

Guru had many devotees in the area including the local king. They offered elegant mansions and palaces for Guru and the group to stay. Guru was in Madurai area for more than a week. It was during this time George Joseph, editor of *Young India* and a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, met Guru in Madurai. From Madurai they proceeded to Ramanathapuram, staying in the palace of the king for a few days. Their next destination was Rameswaram. A comfortable facility was arranged there by another rich devotee.

Guru was planning to stay in Rameswaram for more than a month. But news about the Vaikom Satyagraha reached the area and government officials warned the local temple administrators that Guru belonged to an *untouchable* community. Until then nobody had bothered about Guru's caste as he was revered as a sanyasin and a sage. As a result, some temple officials denied entry to Guru and his disciples to the temples in Rameswaram area.

Guru didn't wish to stay in such a place, and changed his travel plan. Along with a small group of disciples, Guru left Rameswaram. His intention was to go to Colombo from Dhanushkodi, which they reached on October 24, 1926. Even though a devotee arranged for Guru's stay in Dhanuskodi, the area seemed unclean and unhealthy. So, he didn't drink or eat anything while staying there.

Guru visited the *Gandhamadhana Mountain* in the area. The *Mount* is situated in Pamban Island, around two miles from Rameswaram, between the Indian mainland and Sri Lanka. According to Ramayana, the mythical god Hanuman took the flight to Ravana's Lanka from its top. After staying in Ramesawaram area for a few days, Guru along with a few disciples left by ship for Colombo on October 29, 1926.

Second Visit to Sri Lanka (1926)

Sree Narayana Guru's earlier visit to Sri Lanka in 1918 was planned in advance but his second trip was decided abruptly during his stay in Tamil Nadu. Guru wanted to go to Sri Lanka while in Tamil Nadu with the hope of refreshing his mind and body as he was going through a tough time. It was Guru's characteristic not to stay in one place continuously for more than a few weeks. As an ascetic, he travelled frequently from one place to another throughout his active life.

Guru and his close disciples reached Colombo on the morning of October 30, 1926. As a few close devotees in the island were informed of Guru's trip, a huge crowd gathered at Colombo Fort station to receive the sage. Prominent citizens also came to receive him. Many vehicles, decorated with flowers, accompanied Guru and his retinue as musicians played on the way.

Guru was invited to many places and facilities including the Kathiresan Kovil. Guru's presence was celebrated with ceremonial feasts. Many felicitations were organized by Guru's Tamil devotees. Guru's words of wisdom and blessings had significantly impacted the lives of many in Sri Lanka.

One such person was Khader, a Muslim by birth. He was a passionate devotee of Guru. He admired the values and teachings of Hinduism. He changed his name to Kantha Swami and adorned his arms, neck and forehead with sacred ash like Hindus. Even though rich, he led a simple and ascetic life. When he expressed his wish to convert to Hinduism and to leave Sri Lanka to join Guru's *sanyasin* order, Guru advised him that religious conversion wasn't necessary for him to be his disciple. Guru also discouraged him from changing his name to Kanta Swami and told him that he preferred to call him Khader. Taking Guru's advice to heart, he remained as Khader for the rest of his life and abandoned his wish to accompany Guru to Kerala.

Guru did not view religious conversion a mandatory mean to make man a better being. Guru was concerned more about man than about a person's religious affiliation. In *Atmopadesha-Satakam* verses 45 to 47, Guru specifically states his views on the essence of religion, its universal virtues as well as the futility of the never-ending arguments over merits among religions. The attitude expressed by Guru during the conversation with Khader reiterated his profound convictions on the meaningless of religious conversion as a prerequisite to improve the character of an individual.

Guru stayed in Sri Lanka for about two months. Then disciples began to beg him to return to Kerala. Guru's absence was unbearable to many of them. In reality, Guru was hoping to extend the stay as much as possible as he really enjoyed everything that was offered to him by the small nation and its people.

Sri Lanka's secluded forest locations and serene mountaintops were enchanting to him as a mystic yogi. But the intensity of requests from various quarters for Guru's return grew day by day. Guru finally left Sri Lanka on December 21, 1926 and arrived in Sivagiri Mutt on January 1, 1927. As soon as Guru reached the Sivagiri Ashram, the disciples were assigned a serious task. Guru told them to work urgently by consensus on the formation of a new organization exclusively for *sanyasin* disciples.

Solemnizing a Rare Marriage

For the first time in the known history of India, it was Sree Narayana Guru who formally solemnized an inter-racial and inter-cultural marriage in India. While Guru was staying in Sivagiri Mutt. Andiyara Krishnan Muthalali of Paravoor (near Kollam) approached him with a strange request. Krishnan Muthalali was an industrialist of Hindu-Ezhava origin. He was acknowledged as the first Indian to start a factory to export coir products. When Krishnan Muthalali entered the coir business during the 1900s, the industry was fully controlled by a few European companies. It was his spirit of entrepreneurship and vision that effectively ended the European monopoly. Krishnan Muthalali was a devotee of Guru. An innovative visionary, he sent his son K.C. Karunakaran for higher studies in Europe. Karunakaran graduated in Commerce in 1917 from Birmingham University. He then continued his education in Germany and earned his Masters in Economics from Heidelberg University.

While in Heidelberg University, Karunakaran fell in love with Margret Ausserer, a German Christian. Margret was a native of Charlottenburg near Berlin. As the two arrived in Kerala with the hope of getting married, Karunakaran's parents adamantly refused to accept the proposal. No amount of persuasion and pleading could change their mind.

The issue was brought to Guru for an amicable resolution. Krishnan Muthalali hoped that Guru's intervention would sway his son's mind away from a foreign lady. On the other hand, the frustrated Karunakaran saw Guru as the last resort to solve the dilemma. Guru patiently listened to the strong objections of Karunakaran's parents against the proposed alliance.

To obtain the consent of the conservative parents of Karunakaran, Guru used his skills as a mediator. After realizing the strong bonds between Karunakaran and Margaret, Guru successfully convinced Krishnan Muthalali to accept the pair. To Guru, all human beings belonged to one caste and he never approved of distinctions based on race, caste, religion or nationality. Moreover, Guru viewed the marriage as a fusion between two distinct cultures of the East and West. Thus, history was made. The first inter-caste, inter-religious, inter-racial and inter-continental marriage took place in India. Guru blessed the couple by solemnizing their marriage at the Sarada Mutt in Sivagiri.

Afterwards, Karunakaran happily returned to Germany with his wife and lived there as a successful businessman. Their son Revi Karunakaran also became a successful businessman and lived in Germany for many years. They also had a daughter, Leela. Revi had his primary education in Alappuzha and his secondary education in Surrey, U.K. His high school education was done in Lausanne in Switzerland. Revi Karunakaran took his graduate degree in Business Administration from Babson College in the United States. Revi was fluent in many languages including German, English, Italian, Spanish and Dutch besides Malayalam.

After the death of his father in 1952, Revi at the age of 20 assumed the charge of his family's Karan Group of Companies and led it to new heights. With his western education and expertise, Revi

Karunakaran modernized the Indian coir industry. His company began producing sophisticated coir goods for the world market using imported machinery in mid 1960s. For his leadership to the industry, Revi received the "Life Time Achievement Award" from the Government of India in 2001. Until his death on November 25, 2003, Revi Karunakaran and his Karan Groups were the undisputed leaders of the Indian coir industry.

Tradition of Disciple Succession

Sanyasin *Parambara* of Sree Narayana Guru

Since ancient times, the guru-disciple succession was the most basic feature of Indian spiritual and philosophical tradition. All religions that have an Indian root share this common attribute including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. The spiritual knowledge was usually transmitted from generation to generation through these chains of *guru-shishya parambara* or teacher-disciple link. The relationship between a guru and disciples is considered the most pure, holy and unconditional of all human bonds. This tradition is still alive in India. The possession of spiritual prowess and knowledge are the fundamental characteristics of a guru; age, gender, family or other factors seldom play a role in determining a guru's legitimacy.

Like the rishis of the *Upanishad* period, Sree Narayana Guru also initiated a *guru-shishya parambara* by accepting many ascetic disciples into his spiritual fold. The *parambara* founded by Guru before his mortal departure is still flourishing with a large network of ashrams and with a diverse contingent of committed sanyasin disciples. The disciples have made huge impact in the spiritual and social lives of people through their dedicated service, strength of faith and allegiance to their supreme spiritual master. Among them, a few fortunate ones received sanyasa directly from Guru. Others became members of the *parambara* by receiving sanyasa from successive spiritual authorities of the institution.

It continues to give an avenue for those who possess an innate inclination to pursue a spiritual and ascetic life free from the burdens of material life. Guru was very selective in giving *sanyasa* when aspirants approached him with the hope of becoming his disciples. A few were refused the privilege as Guru perceived them incapable in keeping the stringent vows of celibacy or lacking in the essential spiritual qualifications. Many of Guru's pioneer disciples were accomplished siddhas, having spent many years of their life undergoing rigorous sadhanas and penance. Some were organizers or committed men of service. Some were scholars to the core. And some were Sanskrit pundits and Ayurvedic experts. Some were poets and some were great orators. A few were accomplished authors. But they all were humble and loyal to their Guru and preferred to remain in the shadow of their great master. As a result, some of these great men have faded from collective memory of the society they served.

Fortunately, there were active attempts recently to revive the memory of some of those great disciples. Even though many biographies of Guru contain skeleton of information on them, the life and contributions of many largely remained obscure to the populace. Thanks to the research-oriented works of Sadchidananda Swami of Sivagiri Mutt, the biographies of these pioneer disciples of Guru are now available. Unfortunately, these books are in Malayalam. The scope of this book and its constraints do not allow me to discuss their lives in detail. I may try to enlarge upon this in future editions if God willing.

Pioneer Disciples

Guru accepted Sivalingadasa as his first disciple sometime before 1888. Before initiating into *sanyasa*, Sivalingadasa was known as Kochappi Pillai. He was with Guru when the consecration of Lord Siva's deity took place in Aruvippuram in 1888. Sivalingadasa Swami was a yogi and a siddha and consecrated many temples on Guru's instructions. He travelled widely as a companion of Guru during the early years of the ministry. He took Guru's mission to north Kerala and was very active in Thrissur area until his mortal departure in 1919 at the age of fifty-two. Sivalingadasa Swami was a distinguished scholar and was fluent in Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit. He was also the author of a few dozen books and compiled many *mantras* and hymns. *Gurushatkam*, a hymn he compiled in praise of the virtues of Guru, is recited daily by numerous devotees.

Swami Bodhananda was another prominent ascetic disciple who was vital in taking the movement across Kerala in its early years. He was one of the founding members of the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangom, the organization for the ascetic disciples founded by Guru. As an ascetic, he wandered for years in many pilgrimage centers throughout India including the regions of the Himalayas, and conducted years of penance in snow-ridden caves. Swami Bodhananda returned to Kerala as an accomplished *siddha* and a yogi. With his own disciples, he again set out on a pilgrimage to north India. After returning, he became very active in the community. He led a fearless fight against the caste system.

After becoming a disciple of Guru, Bodhananda's approach dramatically changed. He was very pragmatic in his approach to solving societal problems and issues and earned a special place in the hearts of Guru's devotees. He was a great organizer and was sent to Sri Lanka to prepare for Guru's first visit to the island in 1918. He installed deities in many temples in various regions of Kerala on behalf of Guru. Swami Bodhananda played a leading role in organizing the World Parliament of Religions in Aluva in 1924.

Guru anointed him his successor. After the ceremonious ritual at the Sarada Mutt in Sivagiri, Guru prepared a Will in favor of Bodhananda Swami that effectively made him his sole heir of the

Ashram and all other institutions. When Guru attained *Mahasamadhi*, Swami Bodhananda wished to shed his body as he was unable to bear the loss. Even though physically weak, he led the rituals and other ceremonies associated with the burial of the mortal remains of Guru. To the dismay of thousands of devotees and followers, on the third day after Guru attained *Mahasamadhi*, Swami Bodhananda also left his body forever.

Chaithanya Swami was another early disciple of Guru. Earlier he was known as Narayana Pillai. He was fluent in Sanskrit and was a scholar in Vedantic philosophy. Chaithanya Swami was also an expert in *Ayurveda* and *Vaastu*, the traditional science of architecture. Guru had great trust in Chaithanya Swami's abilities. He delegated the administrative responsibilities of many prominent facilities and institutions in southern Kerala to him. He later focussed on north Kerala and advanced the movement in that region. He was the author of many *mantras* and hymns. Chaithanya Swami attained *Mahasamadhi* at age 76 in 1953 while resting at Sundareshawara temple in Kannur.

Missionaries in Action

Govindananda Swami, a devoted disciple and visionary, tried to spread Guru's message outside Kerala as well as to neighbouring countries during the dawn of the 20th century. Govindananda Swami was the first disciple who ventured out to other nations in the name of Guru. After accepting him as a disciple, Guru instructed Govindananda Swami to go on a pilgrimage of India, especially to various holy places in north India including the Himalayas. He also went to Burma (Myanmar). On his return to India, he settled in Kanchipuram in 1915. The first ashram outside of Kerala to spread Guru's message was established in Kanchipuram by Govindananda Swami in 1916.

As a true missionary, Govindananda Swami initiated many service programmes in Kanchipuram to support the local community. His dedication in saving many lives during epidemics won him many admirers. To seek support for the ashram and to spread the teachings of Guru, Govindananda Swami visited many Asian countries. He went to Japan in 1917 and then to Singapore.

Swami Satyavrathan was a native of the coastal district of Alappuzha. His former name was Ayyappan Pillai. He joined Guru at the age of eighteen and served as a teacher in the Sanskrit school of Aluva Advaita Ashramam. He was a great orator and an able organizer. During the early years of the Sree Narayana movement, Swami Satyavratan was instrumental in spreading the message of Guru among the people of mid-Kerala. His services were highly valuable to expand the reach of the SNDP Yogam during its early days to the rural areas of Alappuzha.

Swami Satyavrathan's services as a missionary of the movement were utilized mainly in Sri Lanka in the years following Guru's first visit. Following Guru's advice, he founded *Vinjsaanodaya Yogam*, an organization to set up evening schools and spiritual centers across Sri Lanka. He set up more than forty evening schools on the island. He stayed back in Sri Lanka for nearly three years under Guru's direction and conducted his missionary activities there.

When the summit of religions took place in 1924 at the Aluva Advaita Ashramam, Swami Satyavrathan was its main organizer. In the *Vaikkom Satyagraha*, Swami Satyavrathan galvanized the support of progressive leaders of upper caste Hindus in favour of the movement.

Swami Satyavrathan's premature demise at the age of thirty-four in 1926 was a blow to the movement in general and to Guru in particular. Guru had deputed this loyal and dedicated disciple to execute a number of crucial assignments. Even though he was born an upper caste Hindu, Swami Satyavrathan discarded caste consciousness as a true disciple of Guru.

Exemplary Disciple Who Embraced Christianity

Swami John Dharma Theerthar was another direct disciple who made significant contributions in propagating the philosophy of Guru in various parts of India. The story of John Dharma Theerthar is filled with fascinating twists and turns. He was born as Parameshwara Menon in an aristocratic Hindu family in north Kerala. He was one of the highly educated disciples of Guru. After taking his B.A. degree from Madras Presidency College, he studied law at the University of Bombay. While practicing as a lawyer, he became actively involved

in the fight against social evils such as untouchability and casteism. Menon met Guru in 1926. After learning about his social and religious reformative efforts, in 1927 he became an inmate of the Sivagiri ashram as a disciple of Guru.

As a sanyasi, Menon was named Swami Dhrama Theerthar, and he became a constant companion of Guru. His legal expertise was instrumental in founding the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangom, the monastic order set up by Guru with its headquarters in Sivagiri. He became the first general secretary of the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangom. Swami Dhrama Theerthar's most valuable contribution was the initiatives he took to collect and publish the literary and philosophical works of Guru. As a mouthpiece of Sivagiri Mutt, he started a weekly, *Dharmam*. Swami Dhrama Theerthar also authored many books in English and Malayalam. *The Prophet of Peace* by Dhrama Theerthar is one of the pioneering biographical books on the life and philosophy of Guru and English and it was published in 1933. It was his determination and commitment that restored the legal and occupancy rights on many properties owned by Sree Narayana Dharma Sangom including the rights on the ancestral home of Guru in Chempazhanthi.

Swami Dhrama Theerthar left Sivagiri around 1936 and traveled extensively in various parts of India to propagate the life and message of Guru. In 1941, he published *The Menace of Hindu Imperialism*. The book was widely read by intellectuals and activists including Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Its open attack on the champions of the caste system created some controversy as it was a verdict against Brahmin imperialism and its role in suppressing the hopes and basic rights of millions over the centuries. The book includes passages that reveal the author's righteous anger against a caste system that, according to him, effectively hindered the due recognition of the multifaceted greatness of Guru in Indian history.

Swami Dhrama Theerthar returned to Kerala in 1947. In protesting against casteism within Hindu religion, he formally became a Christian in 1949. Thereafter he was known as Swami John Dhrama Theerthar. Even while living as a missionary of Christ, he continued to regard himself as a disciple of Guru. He passed away on July 19, 1976, and he was laid to rest at the Palayam C.S.I. Christ Church Cemetery in the heart of Thiruvananthapuram.

Ordaining a European as Disciple

Ernst Kirk, A True Seeker from the West

As the marriage between Karunakaran and Margaret was taking place at the shrine of Sarada Devi in Sivagiri under the auspicious guidance of Guru, there was a silent witness to the whole affair. The person watching the ceremony in amazement was also a westerner. While in Britain, he was acquainted with the Theosophical Society and became an admirer of India's age-old tradition and culture. To pursue his spiritual curiosity, he left for India and wandered throughout its unfamiliar terrain in search of a guru of his liking. During that arduous journey he met many saints, sadhus and siddhas. He stayed briefly in some ashrams. He became acquainted with Sri Ramakrishna Mission, Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj. He reached the ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi at Thiruvannamala in southern India. There he heard about Sree Narayana Guru from Ramana Maharshi and from

some of his disciples. He immediately felt a divine connection with the Guru and his ideals and left for Sivagiri. The name of this seeker of Truth from the West was Ernst Kirk.

After meeting Guru, Kirk was convinced that he had found the perfect guru he had been seeking all his life. He decided to stay on in the Sivagiri ashram for a while and became a humble hermit. Within days after his arrival in Sivagiri, a strange thing happened.

One morning Kirk was enchanted by the sight of a historic marriage at the shrine of Sarada Devi. The bride was Margaret, a daughter of the West, and the groom was Karunakaran, a son of the East. The ceremony was taking place under Gurus guidance. Kirk was enthralled by the uncommon sight of a white woman marrying an Indian with the blessings of an Indian sage. His heart was filled with admiration as he grasped the magnanimity of Guru's vision of humanity. He mentally prostrated Guru.

Miraculously enough, Guru noticed Kirk in the crowd. He was asked to felicitate the couple and to share his thoughts to the gathering. A delighted Kirk made a touching speech and congratulated the pair.

The events of that day changed Kirk's life forever. He felt a yearning to become a *sanyasin* disciple of Guru. So, he remained in Sivagiri awaiting Guru's approval. The initiation ceremony of new sanyasins was traditionally conducted by Guru annually during *Vijayadashami Day*. On that day, Guru used to present each eligible seeker a pair of formal saffron clothes as well as an initiating name. As an external symbol of renunciation, the aspiring sanyasins had to shave their head in preparation for the initiation. They had to undergo days of rigorous self-purification exercises in the form of fasts and vows in preparation for the ceremony.

The *Vijayadashami Day* of 1927 was the last time Guru would conduct such a ceremony before his *Mahasamadhi* on September 20, 1928. Guru advised Kirk he would be given sanyasa along with the other *brahmacharis* on that auspicious day. Everybody expected that Guru would ask Kirk to shave his head, give him saffron clothes and would give him a new name. Surprisingly, Kirk was not given any such directives. Kirk himself was perplexed for a while. To the surprise of all, Guru summoned Kirk a day earlier and asked him to arrange a pair of pants and suits as well as a collar tie to match

the dress style of Western gentlemen. On *Vijayadashami* day, all aspirants gathered at the Sarada Mutt and the initiation ceremony began. Guru handed over the saffron dress to each of them except Kirk. As they returned to Guru's abode wearing the saffron attire for the first time, Guru called each of them by a new *sanyasin* name. That was a significant step to formally close the *poorvashrama* or earlier chapter of their life of family and relationships.

Then came the turn of Kirk. Guru told him to bring the set of European attire. He paid obeisance to Guru and devotionally placed the designated items at Guru's feet. Guru picked the items and gave them back to Kirk to initiate him as a *shishya* or disciple. In addition, Guru provided him a pair of new shoes. That was the attire Guru wanted him to wear as a sanyasin of European descendant. As a note of advice, Guru told him that the internal spirit of dedication and renunciation was far more important to a *sanyasin* than the cloth that covers the external body. Guru then addressed him as Kirk Swamy. Thus, Kirk Swamy became the 22nd member of Sree Narayana Dharma Sangam, the sanyasin Order of Guru.

Legacy of Kirk Swamy

The genius in Guru detected the unique expertise of Kirk. He was directed to develop special programmes for developing agriculture and industry using the idle resources of the Sivagiri Ashram. A committee consisted of experts was formed as a pilot group to study the opportunities and to implement the proposals. Kirk was appointed its convener. Guru envisioned almost a century ago to empower people by preparing them for a livelihood by training them as technicians and craftsmen while utilizing the vast areas of land and other properties.

Kirk Swamy was instrumental in the development of the Sivagiri ashram in its earlier stages and was very active in the many endeavours initiated by Guru. Unfortunately, after Guru's Mahasamadhi in 1928, Kirk Swamy gradually distanced himself from the Sivagiri Mutt to pursue an independent path to implement the ideals of Guru. For that, he first relocated to Thiruvananthapuram and began an institution, *Narayana Mandir*. After a few years, he moved to Coimbatore in Tamil

Nadu and founded a new ashram in the name of Guru. From there he began to publish *Life*, a journal for propagating the philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru. Swami Ernst Kirk remained a disciple of Guru until the end of his life in 1951.

While Kirk Swami was in Thiruvananthapuram, a few ascetics joined him in the ashram. They included Europeans and Indians. He ordained some of them into sanyasa. Swami Prajanandan, who was known as Keshava Panicker earlier, was one among them. He assumed the responsibility of running the *Narayana Mandir* in Thiruvananthapuram in Kirk Swami's absence. As a true sanyasin, Swami Prajanandan took the compassionate message of Guru to his heart and served the poor and the wretched in the area. He picked many orphaned children from the filth, bathed them and gave them food, shelter and education. At the ashram, every evening, the boys used to recite *Daivadasakam*, Sree Narayana Guru's universal prayer, as loudly as possible for all those assembled there.

A Dalit boy of Tamilian origin who was rescued from the slums by Swami Prajanandan later became an IAS officer. He provided the financial means for years as the boy was sent to schools and colleges in Palakkad and Aluva. When he returned to Thiruvananthapuram to see Swami Prajanandan after graduating with a Masters degree in Economics, Swami instructed him, "Prepare yourself for taking the Indian Civil Service Examination." Swami, even though physically very weak, gave him a lengthy lecture: "You must study English very well. If you are not fluent in English, you are not good for the modern age. Know that there are good reasons behind Guru's insistence on learning English. If you can, after reaching forty years of age, learn Sanskrit too. I have already made the arrangements for you to receive a modest scholarship for the next four years from the trust fund I created." Swami's feeble but passionate words resonated in the youth's mind as he left the ashram for the last time.

After Swami Prajanandan's mortal departure in 1982, the ashram died out. There is not even a modest tombstone to honour the life of the largely unknown yet true disciple of Guru. After becoming an IAS officer, the man took a journey in search of his benefactor's final resting place which led him to the ancestral property of Prajanandan

Swami in Thiruvananthapuram. He longed to pay obeisance and express his everlasting gratitude to this ideal spiritual follower of the great humanist Guru. There was only an abandoned lamp cut in stone at the grave in thick of bushes and weeds to mark his memory.

Swami Prajanandan's legacy would have been forever lost. Fortunately, the true life of the man who rose from filth to the higher echelons of power was the theme of a moving novel published in 2013 by B. Jeyamohan, an eminent writer in Tamil and Malayalam. Thanks to his contribution, the humanitarian services of Swami Prajanandan, the low profile sanyasin who truly followed the ideals of Sree Narayana Guru in its spirit, is now known to the world (*Nooru Simhaasanangal*, Mathrubhumi Books, 2013).

Fearless Human Rights Activist

The Journey of Ananda Shenoy

Swami Ananda Theerthar was the last disciple who received *sanyasa* directly from Sree Narayana Guru. He was born on January 2, 1905 in a conservative Brahmin family in north Kerala. His parents named him Ananda Shenoy. Being a member of a privileged caste, he was brought up without having any interaction with the despised sections of the society. Even as a youth, he was largely unaware of the social problems such as untouchability.

He was an intelligent student. After completing his Intermediate education from Brennan College at Thalassery, he took B.A. Degree in Physics from the prestigious Presidency College in Madras. While in Madras, Ananda Shenoy got the opportunity to read about the Vaikkom Satyagraha. For the first time, he came to realize the intensity of the social maladies in Kerala. Being a compassionate person, the

seriousness of untouchability and other social inequalities began to haunt Ananda Shenoy. He was determined to do whatever possible to work against its perpetuation.

Ananda Shenoy began to read more about the social conditions of India in general and Kerala in particular. He followed the works of prominent social and religious reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda as well as the independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Vivekananda's visit to Kerala in 1892 and his comments on caste-ridden Kerala touched him. Ananda Shenoy also heard about the social reforms initiated by Guru. He was especially attracted by the ideals of Guru. Guru's message, "One Caste, one Religion, one God for Humans" had a significant impact on him.

After education, discarding a promising professional career, Ananda Shenoy desired to join the Sabarmati Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi. But he was advised to serve a local service facility in Kerala. He joined the Sabari Ashram at Olavakkodu near Thrissur in September 1926. The Sabari Ashram was a unique orphanage for children. Many from the Dalit community lived in the ashram along with children from other castes. The Ashram was founded in 1923 by T.R. Krishna Swamy Iyer, a prominent freedom fighter and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Even though he was born an upper caste, Iyer contributed greatly to the upliftment of Dalits. Not only Hindus but Muslims too were admitted as inmates.

Ananda Shenoy had always longed to meet Guru. The fated day arrived in September 1927. Ananda Shenoy was on a visit to Coimbatore when he heard that Guru was resting at a house nearby. He went there and prostrated before Guru. He was introduced to Guru by a community leader from Kozhikode who knew about the services of Sabari Ashram and Ananda Shenoy's contribution to the Dalits. Guru told to Ananda Shenoy, "Good! It is great to serve the poor." Hearing Guru's words of praise, Ananda Shenoy felt blessed.

Both met again in October 1927 in Palakkad. Then Ananda Shenoy invited Guru to the Sabari Ashram which was not far from the area. Guru spoke to the children and gave fruits to them. The children recited a prayer and Guru advised them about the values of hygiene and learning.

Gandhi's Advice to the Aspiring Youth

In February 1928, Ananda Shenoy embarked on a pilgrimage by foot to the Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat and reached there in May. During the long journey that took around four months, Ananda Shenoy had the opportunity to witness the harsh realities of casteism and untouchability rampant in various parts of India. While interacting with Gandhi at the ashram, Ananda Shenoy shared his longtime wish to accept *sanyasa* and his desire to continue working among Dalits and other lower castes. Gandhi immediately directed him to the abode of Guru.

Ananda Shenoy returned to Kerala in June 1928 and continued his services at the Sabari Ashram at Olavakkodu while awaiting the moment to accept *sanyasa* from Guru. Around this time, Swami Dharma Theerthar, a senior disciple of Guru, arrived at the Sabari Ashram, carrying a letter from Guru. The letter contained an urgent message from Guru expressing his wish to see Ananda Shenoy. This was in July 1928, barely two months before Guru's mortal departure.

Ananda Shenoy reached Sivagiri on July 31, 1928. The next morning, Guru received him with warmth. Ananda Shenoy revealed his passion for *sanyasa* as well as his determination to serve the deprived sections of the society. He also mentioned his educational background and other credentials.

Guru smiled and curiously asked, "Do you know the meaning of *sanyasa*!"

"Yes, I do. It means renunciation!" Ananda Shenoy responded.

"That means you need to renounce everything including the knowledge and other qualifications you have earned so far. In fact, *sanyasa* is a new beginning from complete emptiness!"

To this comment, the perplexed listener had no answer.

Guru continued, "There are many avenues to *sanyasa* but the goal shall be the same. Earned knowledge is an asset forever. Don't lose it. With God's blessings, share it among the needy without reservation."

"Let us recite the beginning lines of the *Isavasya-Upanishad*" Guru instructed a few disciples who were with them.

They began to chant: *"Isa vasyam idam sarvam-yat kincha jagathyam jagat. Thena thykthena bhunjeetha-ma grutha: kasya swithanam."* The essence of the lines is that as everything belongs to everyone, the common resources must be shared among the needy without any trace of selfish motive.

With a smile, Guru told the prospective disciple, *"Sanyasa* is nothing but upholding the essence of this message. Can you follow?"

Ananda Shenoy nodded. But before approving him as a disciple. Guru solicited the opinion of other members of his sanyasin order. They unanimously felt that at least a year's stay in the ashram was required before determining the eligibility to admit him as a member. Guru did not agree. "The wait is unnecessary. Ananda Shenoy can be admitted to our order tomorrow. I know all about him."

There was not a murmur. Guru instructed Ananda Shenoy to prepare for the ceremony on the following day. On August 3, 1928, Guru was carried to the Sarada Devi Temple in Sivagiri to officiate the ceremony. Due to illness, Guru was physically weak to walk. Guru then presented him a pair of saffron robes to wear as a *sanyasin* and named him Swami Ananda Theerthar. He stayed in the ashram only for a few days. On August 5, 1928, he bid farewell to Sivagiri. Guru allowed Swami Ananda Theerthar to return to the Sabari Ashram to continue his service among the needy in the Malabar region. Guru told him not to fear and reminded him about the huge task ahead. As a dedicated soilder-sanyasin, for the next six decades, Swami Ananda Theerthar selflessly worked among the Dalits and other lower castes.

Swamy Ananda Theerthar

Swamy Ananda Theerthar was instrumental in the elimination of many prevalent customs which existed in society and were detrimental to the basic dignity of the Dalits and other depressed communities. In the process of his crusade against caste inequalities and other forms of discrimination, he was confronted with stiff opposition from conservative elements in society. Even though he was attacked brutally many times, Swami Ananda Theerthar was undeterred. His courage, determination, dedication, selflessness and

willingness to suffer all assaults against him in a peaceful manner continue to inspire generations of social activists and humanists.

Swami Ananda Theerthar contributed greatly to the spread of education among Dalits in the Malabar region. When he began his crusade, public schools were closed to Dalits and other lower castes. In many instances, he had to declare open war with the conservative authorities and school administrators who adamantly stood against opening the doors for Dalit students. As the conservative society in Malabar raised stiff resistance to the entry of Dalits to public schools, Swami Ananda Theerthar built a school in the region. He happily used the funds received from selling his ancestral property for building the school and to construct a hostel for the Dalits. He called it "Sree Narayana Vidyalayam," and it was inaugurated on November 21, 1931. When Gandhi visited Kerala in 1934, he visited the *Sree Narayana Vidyalayam* in Pyannur in north Kerala at the invitation of Swami Ananda Theerthar. Gandhi planted a mango tree in the school courtyard.

For decades, Swami Ananda Theerthar struggled as a one-man army for eradicating caste barriers. In 1953, six years after India's independence, Swami Ananda Theerthar suffered physical attack for taking a Dalit boy to a barber shop in Sastamangalam, a small town near Thiruvananthapuram. And on January 30, 1971, the anniversary day of Gandhi's death, Ananda Theerthar was brutally attacked for taking Dalits to the Durga devi temple in Agalpadi near Kasargode. Swami Ananda Theerthar's role in ending the Brahmin-only feast in Guruvayoor temple and forcing the opening of the dining hall to all devotees regardless of caste was a revolutionary achievement. He was also active in the struggle for human rights for Dalits in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Swami Ananda Theerthar served as the first President of the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangom Trust. He stayed in Sivagiri Ashram briefly. He was more comfortable serving the poor and the destitute. He quit the post to free himself for the service of the needy. After a full life of service and sacrifices, Swami Ananda Theerthar attained Samadhi at the age of eighty-two on November 21, 1987.

Organization for Ascetic Disciples

According to the Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions, a Mutt is a monastery where a Guru and his disciples reside together as a community. Sree Narayana Guru envisioned the *Sivagiri Ashram* as a place where committed seekers of Truth irrespective of caste, creed or religion could live as brothers furthering their knowledge and wisdom by engaging in service, study and discourse. To continue the mission among the people in his absence, Guru felt that a formal institution was necessary. During his lifetime, Guru was also able to spread his movement to the far corners of southern India and established many *ashrams* and other institutions.

So, an organization exclusively for his disciple *sayasins* was in Guru's mind for many years. He wanted the organization to propagate his philosophy and vision in its purest form. Also, Guru wanted it to efficiently manage the various assets under his possession. Guru owned land and other resources at various places in southern India.

Some assets were donated by wealthy devotees. Some were acquired by funds collected through his personal efforts. A Will was registered by Guru on May 3, 1926 about the future ownership rights of his assets. The organization Guru had in mind was an extension of this Will. To safeguard the smooth management of the properties and to ensure the legitimacy of his future heirs, Guru's Will clearly specified the institution to be democratic in character. Guru prescribed the member sanyasins to elect their future leader through majority vote. Beyond the outward descriptions of the organizational structure of the proposed institution, Guru had written a poem in *Sanskrit* under the title "*Ashramam*" defining the noble qualities and ideal characteristics expected of the head of the institution as well as *sanyasin* members.

Even though Guru had delegated a few of his senior disciples to chart a constitution for this, it was prolonged due to many reasons including differences among them. A few months before his *Maha samadhi*, Guru again urged his ascetic disciples to come together to execute the assigned responsibility. As a result, the *Sree Narayanana Dhrama Sangam* was formed on January 9, 1928 with Sivagiri as its headquarters. Originally twelve ascetic disciples joined the institution.

An Innovative Pilgrimage Proclamation

The Story of Sivagiri pilgrimage

From North to South and from East to West, India has many pilgrimage centers. The Kumbha Mela is the largest religious gathering on Earth. The Kumbh Mela held in Allahabad in 2013 was attended by around 120 million people. The Himalayas is the storehouse of pilgrimage centers. Captivated by its natural beauty and spiritual mystery, millions of Indians as well as people from all over the world travel to the Himalayan region enduring incredible hardships. In Kerala, pilgrimage to the forest temple of Lord Ayyappa in Sabarimala has become a major religious event.

Unlike the numerous pilgrimages in the world today, the Sivagiri pilgrimage has many unique features. The first Sivagiri pilgrimage took place on December 24, 1932 with only five participants. They began the journey by foot from the home of the illustrious poet

Mulloor S. Padmanabha Panicker in Elavumthitta in mid-Kerala. Clad in yellow robes, they went as pilgrims to Sivagiri, and were nicknamed sarcastically as "yellow-birds." Now the Sivagiri pilgrimage attracts several million people every year.

An interesting conversation took place a few months before Guru's Mahasamadhi while Guru was visiting Kottayam. Guru was visiting the Nagambodom temple in Kottayam on January 16, 1928. Two prominent members of the community, Vallabhassery Govindan Vaidyer and Kittan Writter, approached Guru with folded hands. Guru was resting in an easy chair under a mango tree in the temple compound. They wanted Guru to declare Sivagiri, the site of his ashram, a pilgrimage centre.

Amused by their request, Guru initiated a stimulating conversation with them. When Guru asked them why they wanted to have Sivagiri as a new pilgrimage place, they cited the demeaning experiences they had to endure in Hindu holy places which were predominantly controlled by upper castes. Guru said usually a place was recognized as a pilgrimage center due to the sacred connotations spread over centuries. But the unflinching devotees stood their ground. They were convinced that if Guru agreed, then his divine words had the mystic capacity to make Sivagiri a holy place. Appreciating the intensity of their faith, Guru consented with a few simple words: "Permission is granted."

Interestingly, Guru authorized the first of January, which is also the New Year Day in the English calendar, as the formal day of the Sivagiri pilgrimage. Guru advocated ten days of self-austerity measures that consisted of Buddha's *panchasudhi* or five-Purities for the pilgrims. The five-Purities consisted of bodily hygiene, purity of words, purity of mind, purity of action and purity of food.

Guru also careful in prescribing the details of the robes to be worn by pilgrims. He didn't want anyone to incur unnecessary expenses. After suggesting a simple attire of yellow in colour, Guru advised them to wear old and used clothes dipped in water solution made with mixing a bit of raw tumeric pulp. Turmeric is known for its antibacterial properties. To Guru, yellow was preferred over other colours because it was also the accepted colour of Sree Krishna and Sree Buddha. Yellow would also distinguish them from normal

householders who predominantly wear white and sanyasins who wear saffron clothes. Sabarimala pilgrims wear black. Guru wanted the whole experience to be simple and humble. Guru strongly opposed the wasteful spending of money in the name of pilgrimage.

Eight Objectives of Pilgrimage

Even though Guru agreed to have an annual pilgrimage to Sivagiri, he had specific outlook on the purpose of a pilgrimage. He didn't want to grant the wish just to satisfy the pilgrim's devotional needs alone. Rather, he specifically instructed the devotees to utilize the occasion as an opportunity to set off an all-encompassing progress in the society. He envisioned it as an occasion for enhancing knowledge, self development and progress. He directed a list of eight diverse topics for serious discussion during the occasion, ranging from agriculture and trade to science and technology. Guru instructed organizers to plan educational lectures by experts on a wide variety of topics. Guru expected the organizers to invite qualified experts on these topics for delivering well-prepared lectures for the benefit of pilgrims.

It was approximately a century ago that Guru had the vision to define such a pragmatic pilgrimage. The Sivagiri pilgrimage uniquely remains a pilgrimage for enhancing the holistic development of the participant. He advised the devotees to devise plans to put the acquired knowledge and principles into practice. Guru reminded them that success requires consistent effort, and that the individual and the nation should benefit from the pilgrimage.

Sivagiri is presently known as the place of Guru's Mahasamadhi where Guru's mortal remains were ceremoniously buried. The most beautiful and elegant *Samadhi Mandap* or Memorial Tower at the site provides immense solace to millions of disciples, devotees and followers. The highlight of the pilgrimage is still its series of lectures and scholarly discussions by expert personalities. The uniqueness of Sivagiri pilgrimage lies in the fact that the quest for knowledge permeates faith. It is the only pilgrimage place where attendees stay for three consecutive days and listen to lectures on topics beneficial to all people.

The Sivagiri pilgrimage begins annually on December 30 and ends on January 1.

Unique School for Religious and Philosophical Studies

The idea of a theological institution in Sivagiri for studying all religions of the world was announced by Sree Narayana Guru at the World Parliament of Religions held in 1924 at the Aluva Advaita Ashramam. This ideal institution was visualized for aspiring seekers for a rigorous study of the various schools of Indian philosophy as well as theological concepts and philosophy of all major religions. Guru believed that the fundamental reason behind all religious strife was lack of proper knowledge on religion.

Guru formally laid the foundation stone of the institution at the top of the Sivagiri Hill on October 17, 1925. He proposed its name as *Brahma Vidyalyaya*. Following the pattern of the ancient *gurukula* system of education, in which the student leaves his family for living with the Guru for years until the completion of the study, a seven-year course was devised for aspiring students at the *Brahma Vidyalyaya*.

The students who attend the *Brahma Vidyalaya* needs to follow a life of celibacy as they live in *ashram*. They are termed *brahmacharis* like their ancient predecessors during the *Upanishad* era. After the successful completion of the course, those *brahmacharis* have the freedom to accept the ascetic life of *sanyasa* or they can return to family life. Either way, such learned men would become invaluable assets to the society.

The *Brahma Vidyalaya* was formally opened only years after the mortal departure of Guru. To Guru, the *Brahma Vidyalaya* was a grand concept. He was hoping to raise a huge sum of money for its construction and functioning. Although the institution was not able to reach the scale and magnitude as intended by Guru, it has made tremendous impact in the social, religious, spiritual and philosophical sphere of Kerala and beyond. Many learned men including accomplished Sanskrit scholars, philosophers as well as religious pundits from diverse denominations have served the *Brahma Vidyalaya* as *acharyas* or teachers.

Many students have attended the seven-year course since inception. A majority were later ordained as *sanyasis*. The Sivagiri Ashram and the various institutions across India under the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangom are managed by these *asectics*. Well educated in philosophy and religion, many of these *sanyasis* travel widely and conduct lectures.

Prayers of the Sage

The most defining aspect of Sree Narayana Guru's character was his spiritual grace. External disturbances and noises, whether social, religious or political, failed to affect his sagely demeanour. He compiled many exceptional prayers in prose as well as in poem. Those prayers exemplify the devotional, spiritual and philosophical realm of the great sage.

A Prayer in Prose

After Lord Shiva was installed at the Kolathukara temple, Sree Narayana Guru composed a prayer in prose. It was intended not just for recitation but for meditation. The prayer seeks to educate the devotee on the eternal spiritual and scientific truths about the universe. The prayer is an attempt to elevate the reciter to experience the non-dual or *advaita* realm and allow such a person to feel the

ultimate ecstasy of joining with the Supreme Being "Param-Atma" as a result.

"All objects of our perception exist in three distinct levels: Physical (*stoola*), *subtle* or the conceptual (*sooskhma*), and beyond the realm of human perception (*karana*). They all take their existence from *Param-Atma* or the Supreme Self, and will return to it inevitably. Hence, other than *Param-Atma*, there is nothing else.

The *Param-Atma* destroys all negative traits and eliminates forever such tendencies from regenerating. The grace of *Param-Atma* cleanses my senses allowing me to tread the path of virtue. That *Param-Atma* is to be meditated upon, and I am meditating upon its divine manifestation.

O' *Param-Atma*\ Bless me with your grace so that I may always meditate upon you and experience your bliss.

Oh God! Anything we perceive is not eternal. Just like a water-bubble, our body may disappear any time too! Everything is like a dream! What else can one say!

We are not body, we are the Cosmic Consciousness. Before our body came into being, we existed as Consciousness. Even when our body disappears, we will continue to remain radiating like this. We will not be affected by the various dilemmas of life such as birth, death, poverty, disease, fear. Even when I engage in mundane affairs to sustain my life, let me contemplate on these holy words of assurance as well as on the *Param-Atma* who is inspiring me with these virtuous thoughts.

By taking away forever all my impurities, give me your bliss! Bless me in leading a prosperous and peaceful life to finally reach your abode."

Daiva-Dasakam: Glorification of God in Ten Verses

O' God! Save us!
Hold on to our hands.
To the ocean of miseries,
You're the captain, and

Your holy feet the mighty ship.
With undivided faith and attentiveness,
Allow us to be in your profound hold!
As there remains nothing to our concern,
Let us dwell on you forever.
You deliver all our needs,
And, of course, our daily bread,
Making us full and content,
You're our sole Lord indeed.

The ocean, waves, winds, and its depth
Likewise, all of us, this magical universe,
Your amazing grace, and You!
All inseparable, let us comprehend.

O' God! The Divine action in creation!
You're the great Creator of all
Everything is nothing but You
And You in everything too!

As the force of illusion, its possessor,
And who revels in such mystical play,
By relieving us of all illusions,
Raise us to your abode,
O' Graceful Being!

You're the Truth, Wisdom, and Bliss!
The Present is nothing but You
Past and Future, Your manifestations!
And our voice too your grace!

Your glorious name!
It pervades our soul,
encompassing everything.
With awe and wonder,
We bow to You,

O' Lord! Glory to you!

Glory to You! O' Lord!

Comforter of the afflicted.

Glory to You! O' Blissful One!

Glory to you, the most compassionate!

In the ocean of Your profound grace!

Let us all immerse

Enduring the eternal bliss,

Forever in boundless joy!

The Nectar of Daivadasakam

In the Upanishad tradition, only *Isavasyopanishad* can be considered as a close cousin of *Daivadasakam*. The holistic reach of *Daivadasakam* on a spiritual and philosophical level is beyond the boundaries of all known religions. The following summary is the essence of *Daivadasakam*:

The submission with total faith in God relinquishes all senses of fear and insecurity instantly. As the pure devotee experiences only God and nothing else everywhere and in everything, that individual is deemed to enjoy a state of ecstasy.

Only God is qualified to be called our true Lord since God satisfies all our needs. Like the waves, the winds and the depth are inseparable from an ocean, we need to deepen our understanding to realize the extent that the whole of creation from the minute microbes to the multitude of galaxies, the divine force behind this profound wonder of creation, and the enthralling and amazing grace of God are nothing but God's own manifestations.

As such, God's presence is in all creations; and the art of creation as well as the ingenuity of God in synchronizing the diverse characters and unique features to form the multitude of distinct creations are also not distinct from God. As far as the grand scheme of God's play is concerned, the phenomenon of individual

existence appears to reside in the realm of a divine dream like an illusionary experience such as the mirage in a desert. Only with God's grace, we can attain the realm of eternity.

God is Truth, Wisdom and Bliss. Even though we divide the measure of time mainly into three states of present, past and future, the true nature of time is beyond measure. In fact, continuity as the nature of time makes it inseparable from present. Likewise, the nature of God is always "present". So, the presence of God in the form of Truth, Wisdom and Bliss can only be experienced with that ever-alive concept of "time" in the context of "present".

The whole universe is nothing but the manifestation of God. As such, God is not confined to a specific place, thing, time or form, and the the graceful presence of God is encompassing our being. Naturally, we are humbled by God's grace as we long for His blessings. God is the embodiment of compassion, the source of infinite bliss, and the divine stream of caring grace, and let us praise His glory. God's grace is nothing but a mighty ocean. Let us immerse eternally to its depth to draw the nectar of bliss.

“Isa Vasyam Idam Sarvam”

Sree Narayana Gurus translation of *Isa Vasyo-panishad* from Sanskrit to Malayalam deserves special attention for multiple reasons. Guru's translation of *Isa Vasyopanishad* exemplifies his unbound admiration to this unique prayer of the *rishis*. Guru has succeeded in bringing the original vision of the prayer in its original purity and beauty to the readers of Malayalam. *Isa Vasyopanishad* is a compilation of eighteen *mantras* in Sanskrit. Guru has done the translation in twenty-two verses.

The beginning verses establish the all-pervading presence of God in the universe. As all beings are nothing but a manifestation of God, everyone is duty bound to observe a righteous life towards the welfare of the world. A craving for anything that belongs to others must not be entertained at all. If an individual lacks the proper understanding and spiritual discipline to perceive God's presence in every being, such a person is advised to do the duties that are demanded of him or her diligently.

To be worthy of living, nothing more is required of that individual other than submitting simply to the will of God with a sense of detachment to worldly bounties. *Isa Vasyopanishad*, in Guru's words, further warns that those who ignore these noble paths prescribed by the *rishis* eternally endanger their souls. A world enveloped by complete darkness is awaiting those who are simply pursuing the gratification of desires at the cost of a moral mind.

Verse seven proclaims that if a person is capable of comprehending that the whole universe and its diverse manifestations exists in the soul in the form of consciousness, such an elevated individual will not despise anyone or anything.

Verse seventeen is an earnest appeal to the *sun god*. Here sun is not only the source of light and knowledge but also the personification of all faculties that supports this universe. The seeker realizes that the Supreme Soul or *Para-Brahma* is not directly or easily visible to the common eye as it is shielded by a golden cover. The plea to the *sun god* is to remove that shining cover of gold so that the seeker can experience the grace of the Supreme Lord.

The last two verses are dedicated to the Lord of Light popularly addressed as the *Agni god*. The translation of the verses are as under:

"O' Holy Light!

We pray to help us reach the abode of God

Lead us through the illuminated paths of virtues

You alone witness our deeds, and know its merits

Safeguard our minds from the stains of deception

Lord! Let us prostrate before you in total submission."

Guru possessed in-depth knowledge of the Upanishads. One of his life's missions was to resurrect the essence of the knowledge and wisdom inherent in them. His prayers, hymns and other philosophical writings such as *Atmopadesha-Satakam* and *Darsana-Mala* are testimonies to this proficiency in the *vedantic* concepts of the Upanishads. *Daivadasakam*, the universal prayer written by Guru in 1914, has significant resemblance to *Isa Vasyopanishad*. Out of the one hundred and eight commonly recognized Upanishads, ten

are considered the principal *Upanishads*. *Isa Vasyopanishad* is the simplest among them.

The Vedas and the Upanishads, the ancient scriptures, are considered the foundation of Indian philosophy, spirituality and religion. This huge volume of divine literature was produced by the collective efforts of many *rishis* or sage philosophers over a long period of time. Even though the Vedas were believed to have been composed around four thousand years ago, Upanishads as an extension to the Vedas were composed at a later period spanning approximately from 800 BCE to 300 CE. The *rishis*, the sage-poets who led a humble and contemplative life in forests, envisioned moral and ethical theories as guidelines to lead an ideal *dharmic* life.

The ideals of spirituality, meditation, yoga and self-realization are defined in the *Upanishads*. The aim of the *Upanishads* is to guide the evolution of individuals and instill in them knowledge and values. The *Upanishads* discusses in detail profound concepts such as *atman* or individual soul, *Brahman* or eternal Reality, *nishkama karma* or selfless actions, *moksha* or individual salvation, *punarjanma* or reincarnation and *dharma* or righteous duty. The Rishis who authored the Vedas and the Upanishads conceived *Brahman* as the eternal Reality, Supreme Truth or the Absolute. According to their concept, *Brahman* is beyond any form or attribute. They further defined the Reality as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, or Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. They also declared that "*Ekam Sat, Vipraa Bahudhaa Vadanti*." They meant that even though there is only one Supreme Reality, people tend to call the same Supreme Reality by different names.

The famous declaration of Rigveda, the oldest of the four ancient Indian scriptures, "let noble thoughts come from all directions," epitomizes the humility as well as the height of thinking achieved by the *rishis*. "*Sarvam Khwalitham Brahma*" or "everything is nothing but God" was their attitude as they tried to define the purpose of human life. The Vedas and Upanishads are replete with mystical expressions and intuitive revelations.

The Vedic literature reflects the nobility and vision of the *rishis* as they attempted to unravel the mysteries of Nature. They conceptualized that every human being is "endowed by their creator with an unalienable" quest to realize ultimate peace. The message of

the *Upanishads* is that the most precious wealth is *Shanti* or ultimate peace but neither material abundance nor elements of external comforts can lead us towards that experience of ecstasy. Guru termed that state of contentment as *Athma Sukha* or state of inner bliss (verse 49, *Athmopadesa-Satakam*).

Numerous great personalities from around the world have been fascinated by the wisdom espoused by the sages of ancient India. Their knowledge on the cosmic secrets was acknowledged as unique in its scope and significance. Western scientists like Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein candidly acknowledged the metaphysical theories and findings of the Vedas as inspiring. The Vedic revelations on the universe continue to amaze the scientific community as they are still grappling with its mysterious secrets.

While comparing the contributions and legacies of ancient civilizations, Nobel laureate and Mexican intellectual Octavio Paz commented: "I have always marvelled at the world's diversity of cultures and civilizations; nevertheless, much as I find barbarous the belief that one race is superior to another, treating all cultures as the same strikes me as a modern superstition. I deeply admire the originality of the Mesoamerican and Incan civilizations, but I recognize the fact that neither of the two has given us creations comparable to the *Upanishads*" (In Light of India, Octavio Paz, page 90).

Hymns of Exemplary Beauty and Devotion

The devotional movement in India has a long history. It was a strong force in the lives of people from the 7th to the 17th century. Many saint poets representing various generations participated in what was popularly known as the *Bhakti Movement*. Traditionally, it was championed by the lower castes. It provided them an avenue to cultivate faith and hope while facing social suppression. The movement in a way helped them to cherish a personal relationship with the gods while eliminating the role of the priestly class who considered themselves the only qualified intermediaries between men and gods. Hence, the movement also was an indirect assault on the social and religious systems of those times.

Sree Narayana Guru contributed around thirty hymns towards the vast collection of devotional literature. Prof. G. Balakrishnan Nair, a great scholar and an authority on Guru's works, offered an explanation

on the rationale behind Guru's numerous hymns depicting gods. He stresses that the fundamental philosophy explicitly espoused by Guru in all his philosophical works is *advaita* or non-duality. The *advaita* theory stipulates that *Brahman* or the Divine Consciousness is the Supreme Reality or Eternal Truth behind all existence, and everything else is simply the different manifestations of *Brahma*. But this sublime way of understanding and experiencing *Brahma* is possible only for a few who are willing to submit themselves to a long and rigorous meditative *sadhana*.

For any serious seeker, this long and arduous journey towards the realization of Brahman involves many stages and phases before reaching the final destination. Guru's life and experiences also reflect this pattern. His many hymns are testimonies to the blissful experiences and mystic visions he endured during this journey. As such a spiritual journey is generally impractical for common people, deity worship has been advised as a preferred approach to fulfil their spiritual and devotional needs.

Thus, the gods and goddesses in the form of deities qualify as manifestations of *Brahman*. As a popular tradition, deity worship has been adopted by a long chain of sages and philosophers from Ved Vyasa to Sri Sankara. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, one of the greatest Indian spiritual masters of the 19th century and the guru of Swami Vivekananda, through his worship of the Mother goddess in the form of *Kaali* exemplified this tradition. According to Ramakrishna, the deity is neither different from the god it represents nor separate from Brahman. He unequivocally proved at least on a few occasions that the purity and intensity of devotion inherent in the devotee are the defining factors in perfecting the deity worship.

Guru approved, accepted and promoted the legitimacy of deity worship. We can see some similarities in the way Ramakrishna and Guru viewed deity worship. While Ramakrishna's deep devotion to the gods in the form of deities was evident in the way he physically treated and worshipped them, Guru expressed his intense affinity towards the gods through the expression of words in the form of hymns. After consecrating a deity, as a common practice, Guru took time to express his deep and mystic relationship with that deity. Many of his hymns share this common trait.

Sree Krishna-Darsanam, *Sree Vasudeva-ashtakam* and *Vishnu-astakam* are the earliest of his hymns. Those were written while he was staying at the Varanappally home as a young student. *Vinayaka-ashtakam* is a hymn in praise of Lord Vinayaka, and was written after consecrating the deity of Lord Vinayaka at Kottar in Tamil Naadu.

Janani Navaratna Manjari, *Siva Satakam* and *Shanmukha Strotam* share a common characteristic: In all hymns, Guru engages with the "Big Picture" of spirituality as they involve indepth philosophical deliberations on *Vedanta* or *Advaita*. Thus, they prompt serious reciters to go beyond deity worship and to imbibe the nectar of spirituality in the highest sense.

Generally, the title of each hymn would tell its length measured in the number of stanzas. The ones having five stanzas are categorized as *panchakas*, those having eight are *ashtakas*, and the ones having ten stanzas are termed *dasakas*. A few of his hymns have one hundred stanzas. They are called *satakas*. Some hymns do not fit into any of these categories as far as length is concerned. They generally share common titles such as *keerthanam*, *stothram*, *stavam*, etc.

Like the divine flow of Mother Ganga, those hymns stand as a testimony to his realm as a poet. While conveying a deep intimacy he enjoys with the various manifestations of the Divine, he freely plays with words to create beautiful imageries and magical rhythms. Even though there are no shortages of Hindu gods, only five gods are the subject matter of Guru's hymns. He was very close to the *Saiva* tradition. Most of his hymns are on either Lord Shiva or his son Lord Subramanya. Six of them are on Mother Goddess, three on Lord Vishnu and one on Lord Ganapati, the elder son of Lord Shiva.

Three Poems on the Virtues of Ahimsa

The defining theme of Sree Narayana Guru's two poems, *Jeeva-Karunya Panchakam* and *Anukampa-Dasakam*, is *ahimsa* or genuine compassion. Guru has also written a small verse, *Ahimsa*, to expound his strong convictions on the consequences of harming harmless beings. Guru's poems go beyond the realms of empathy and sympathy as they philosophically establish compassion as the constitutional duty of every human being. In them, he passionately expresses his heartfelt feelings of kindness, concern, and connection towards all beings. *Sree Narayana Dharmam*, another book summarizing his philosophical doctrines in Sanskrit verses, also put *ahimsa* as the most desirable virtue of a noble human being.

Even though *ahimsa* is often translated as nonviolence, its meaning cannot be contained within the constraints of that simple word. A person who observes *ahimsa* naturally refrains from causing hurt to

any living beings, emotionally as well as physically. Moreover, such a person genuinely feels the pain and joy of all other living beings. Even wild animals and poisonous snakes feel kinship with a person of compassionate love.

The early biographers of Guru, who accompanied him on many occasions during his public life, made many references in this regard. They recorded him sharing his intimate personal experiences with the natural world during the days of his intense ascetic practices. While he stayed alone in mountain caves and forests, often times leopards and snakes not only gave him company but also guarded him with care. Guru's conviction was that even the so called wild beings will remain calm and harmless if we treat them with natural friendliness. "If we have no motive at all to hurt them, they won't hurt you either," he stated to his disciples.

Sree Narayana Guru's profound and multifaceted impact on the social, religious and philosophical realms are well known. But his passionate calls for a compassionate and *ahimsa-based* life as well as the philosophical and theological doctrines supporting it deserve more attention and further study. Rather than just advocating his concepts, he provides an array of philosophical reasons, profound observations and moral justifications in its support. Moreover, his concept on compassionate *ahimsa* is comprehensive, holistic and much deeper in its scope and application as he unequivocally establishes *advaita* or non-duality as the philosophical basis of his doctrine.

The opening lines of *Jeeva-Karunya Panchakam* states that as all living beings are diverse manifestations of *paramathma* or *Brahman*, they are naturally united in a fraternal relationship. Guru asks, "Once we inculcate within us this truth, how could anyone kill another living being for food and consume its flesh?" The second verse explains that abstaining from eating meat is far better than the act of killing. Guru emphasizes that all religions share the universal concerns regarding this fundamental message of compassion.

Verse four is a clear call for cultivating a vegetarian-living, and it reiterates that eating meat is the cause that prompts the killings. He cites the correlation between supply and demand in support of his assertion. So, the blame for killing must rest with the meat-

eaters. Verse five observes that an ideal human being shall abstain from killing other creatures. Those who fail to follow such a virtuous life are not at all different from wild animals. When someone kills another living being, that person obviously forfeits all goodness and earned virtues as an individual.

The beginning words of *Anukampa-dasakam* dwell on the relevance of a compassionate living. The first verse calls for an unreserved and unconditional compassion towards all forms of life including the most insignificant ones. Guru then equates compassion with pure devotion towards God. The second stanza advises that genuine compassion is the source of all grace. Consequently, all kinds of misfortune will follow a person who lacks compassion. The third verse proclaims that only a genuinely compassionate person experiences the blessings of life.

"Without the feelings of compassion, an individual is nothing but a heap of decaying flesh," says the fourth verse. Such an individual is further characterized as a "mirage in a hot desert" and thus useless to the world. Guru compares the unkind and merciless person as "a flower that lost its natural fragrance". The fifth verse offers a key to immortality: It says that even after death, a person can live forever in the minds of others if the core of that person is compassion.

In *Ahimsa*, a small but profoundly disquieting poem, Guru vividly expresses his strong condemnation of the act of killing animals for food. Moreover, his words are filled with righteous indignation against those who engage in such cruel deeds.

Life is the most precious gift from God, and no one has the right to take away that right. Unfortunately, human history is marred by war, violence, genocide and numerous other forms of senseless killings. Every day the media is bringing us horrifying news about the killing of innocent and vulnerable people from various regions of the world. It is in this global context of hatred, violence and war that we need to listen with renewed vigour and sincerity to Guru's insistence on compassionate *ahimsa*.

Mind of a *Rishi*

Spiritual Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru was well versed in the classical texts of ancient India. He was also an admirer of the *Dravidian* traditions and the pre-Aryan school of thoughts. Guru was very familiar with the classical Tamil lore including *Thirukkural* by the sage poet Thiruvalluvar who lived around two thousand years ago. Guru had a great command over Sanskrit as well as Malayalam and Tamil. He had written extensively in all three languages. The volumes of contemplative verses composed by Guru such as *Atmopadesha Satakam* and *Darsanamala* reflect his true personality as a self-realized soul and a *rishi* who experienced the Universal Consciousness.

By promoting a philosophy of holistic-spiritualism, Guru attempted to free God and spirituality from the influence of narrow religious dogmas. His innovative theological revelations have captured the

attention of many thoughtful minds. Even though Guru honoured all religious traditions, admired the merits of diverse faiths, and advocated a genuine understanding among followers of various faiths, his philosophy was built on the foundations of the ancient sages of the *Upanishad*. The transformative effects of Guru's teachings on unity as well as its impact in realizing peace and understanding among people of diverse backgrounds have been widely acknowledged. My attempt here is to glimpse through only a few of his philosophical works. Contemplating on those verses may allow us to experience the beauty and depth of Guru's divine mind.

One Hundred Verses on Cosmic Core

Atmopadesha Satakam is a philosophical Counsel on attaining perfect bliss by experiencing the Cosmic Core. It is a revelation of Sree Narayana Guru's own experiences as a seeker of Truth. As an enlightened philosopher, Guru provides invaluable knowledge to lead our lives as perfect human beings. The teachings may help us overcome the myriad of physiological and psychological problems, worries and issues. In fact, it is a perfect solution to strengthen our mind from potential weaknesses that can be detrimental to our wellbeing.

People all over the world suffer from self-made afflictions as a result of their misguided perceptions. To them, *Athmopadesa-Satakam* is a step by step process to reboot their mental system for realizing the ultimate purpose of human life. Its knowledge pervades all barriers due to its universal applicability. A basic learning of this valuable book of poems has its benefits. It is a collection of one hundred verses.

*"Arivilum-Eari-Arinjidunnavan-Than
Uruvilum-Othu Purathum-Ujjwalikkum
Karu-vinu Kannukal-Anjhum- Ulladakki
Theru- Therea Veenu- Vanangi-Othideanum."*

These are the opening words in simple yet mystic language. The lines below are the result of a long (and tough) attempt to paraphrase what was originally written in Malayalam.

Within the noble soul of the realized seeker,
 And beyond, pervading all boundaries,
 Glows the Cosmic Core.
 Withdrawing all the five senses,
 Remain in eternal submission to the Cosmic Core.

What is *Karu* or Cosmic Core?

The central theme of the first verse is the introduction of "*Karu*," the cosmic Core. Guru says that for the *Karu* to glow in a person, that individual has to be "*Arivilum-Eari-Arinjidunnavan*" or someone who seeks the higher realms of wisdom, a serious seeker on the path of enlightenment. Guru advises us to submit ourselves eternally to that cosmic Core, also known as *Brahman* or the Supreme Being. But how we can submit to the *Karu*? Guru gives us a systematic, two-step process to be qualified to receive the realization of *Karu*.

First, the seeker is advised to follow the process of "*Kannukal-Anjhum-Ulladakki*" or enforce the withdrawal and internal convergence of the five senses. Guru wants the prospective seeker to engage in an unconditional and eternal submission to the *Karu*. He states "*Theru-Therea Veenu-Vanangi-Othideanum*". This means the prospective seeker shall acquire the ability to regulate the mind to avoid any distraction due to undesired experiences. Eventually, the seeker may perceive all sensory experiences as nothing but the manifestations of God.

Why Guru wants us to realize *Karu*?

Through many later verses, Guru elaborates that knowing *Karu*, that Core Reality is supposed to be the real goal of life. All our knowledge and efforts become futile unless we know that Core. *Karu* is defined as the only reason behind all affairs of life. From that single cause, a multiplicity of effects takes place. So, by knowing the fundamental cause, knowledge on all its extensions will also be revealed.

How we withdraw our senses?

A complete withdrawal of senses! Is it practical? What is the meaning of eternal submission? Guru provides ample explanations to these fundamental doubts.

The clutters and gutters of our mind remain in the way of reaching *Karu*, the eternal Reality. Without fully clearing the internal blocks of our mind, we are unable to establish an effective link of communication with the cosmic Consciousness. For this, we need to subjugate our senses and withdraw them from all undesired wanderings. As we cleanse the impurities and shed our ego, a natural inclination to submit ourselves with humility to that Reality may occur. Unfortunately, the withdrawal of the senses is not an easy task. Rather than engage in futile attempts to artificially withdraw the senses from its indulgences, perceiving everything as manifestations of *Karu* is suggested as an alternative. *Karu* is nothing but *Brahman*, the eternal Reality or Infinite Consciousness, popularly known as *Iswar* or God. Visualizing God's presence in every being and every action is equivalent to eternal submission to *Karu*. For that a seeker must purify the mind from self-tainting flaws of *raga* and *dvesha* or deficiencies in the form of ego, possessiveness, attachments and hatred (Verse 1).

What is Maya? How do we overcome it?

Guru asserts that it is the duty of the seeker of Truth to realize through intense introspection that all perceptions of the senses are nothing but the manifestations of *Karu* or *Brahman*, here described as the Cosmic Sun that rises above in the Sky of Consciousness (Verse 2).

Guru states that all sensory perceptions are illusions on a grand scale. He advises us to endure the indivisible connectivity among the perceived differences. He cites the example of the series of waves that continuously rise and then subdue in a mighty ocean. As we are immersed in ignorance; we tend to view and interpret reality in a prejudiced sense. Even though the waves are nothing

but the inseparable part of the ocean, the viewer may experience not only each wave as different from each other but also considers the series of waves as a phenomenon different from the ocean itself (Verse 3).

According to *Vedanta*, every object is being perceived as distinct and independent because of the effect of the illusionary force termed *Maya*. Unless we overcome *Maya*, life will be a miserable experience due to our perverted perceptions. Lacking a sense of unity beyond superficial differences, people fight over religion, God, nationality and ideology, resulting in irreparable damage to the fabric of human society.

What is *Tri-Puti*?

The above phenomenon is traditionally described as *Tri-puti* by Indian philosophers including Guru. *Tri-Puti* is the three apparent divisions in the process of knowing an object. The first aspect of the division is the *knower* or the one who knows the object, the second is the concept of *knowledge* that is acquired through the process of knowing the subject matter, and the third is the *object* itself. To be free and content, a person must grow beyond these conditioned and compromised modes of superficial perceptions by knowing that all are manifestations of the same Truth or knowledge. Guru advises the seeker to overcome *Maya* or ignorance as that is the required prerequisite for gaining access to *Karu* or the eternal Core (Verse 4).

A Silent Witness!

Human beings are basically entangled in a repetitious three-state cycle of consciousness that consists of wakefulness, dream and then deep sleep. This phenomenon is termed "*avasta-thryam*" in Indian philosophy. Guru reminds about an invaluable source of light, often ignored by many, that remains a silent and eternal witness to our mundane routines. To bring meaning to our life, it is our constitutional duty as human beings to know God, described by Guru as "*Vilamathiyatha-Vilakku*" means the invaluable and eternal light (Verse 5).

A Universal Religion!

Atma-Upadesha Satakam is a perfect mix of poetry, spirituality, philosophy, science and much more. Through the one hundred verses, Guru attempts to share the enlightened wisdom for the benefit of humanity that he acquired through *tapas* and meditation. It is not addressed to a specific audience. Its subject matter is not limited to any specific period or place. It is universal in its theme and approach.

For example, right in the middle of this long poem (in Verse 49), Guru declares in unequivocal terms that the fundamental reason for all human toil is to acquire *Atma-Sukha* or self-happiness. No matter whether we assume that our engagement is in the service of family, society, nation or the world, our pristine goal as individuals is to seek happiness and contentment for ourselves. Our affections (storage), friendships (*Phila*), romantic relationships (Eros) and unconditional love (*Agape*) are only interpretations of this fundamental truth in different contexts. In a final assessment, it all comes down to our self-satisfaction or happiness. The universal process of seeking self-happiness qualifies as the only one religion common to all. Realizing this notion, one should not contaminate his self or surrender his peace by engaging in futile misadventures over religion or faith (Verse 49).

How do we attain ultimate self-happiness?

As a person begins to experience everything through a profound sense of "Oneness", such an individual reaches a unique state of wisdom. This feeling of "Oneness" is nothing but the awareness that every being is an extension of *Brahman* or God. When a person truly experiences God in everything, such a blessed individual will be free from all kinds of negative traits. So, whatever such individuals do for personal betterment and wellbeing, such actions will naturally be beneficial to others as well. Only such an ideal person can attain success and perfection in everything. Eternal peace and happiness belong only to such great souls (Verse 24).

So, goes the flow of the divine verses, giving counsel on "*Akhantamam Chit-Khanam*" or the source of Infinite ecstasy.

According to Guru, experiencing is the only way to know this "ocean of nectar" or "*Amrutha-Abdhi*" (Verse 97).

Thousands of years ago, through meditation and spiritual introspections, the *Rishis* inquired about the mysteries of the universe. They termed the mystic force behind all creation as *Brahman*. It is puzzling that the *Rishis* defined *Brahman*, also known as the Supreme Reality, as pure Consciousness. To *Rishis*, *Brahman* is *niraakaara* or shapeless and *nirguna* or without having any character. Guru's mystic poems shed invaluable light into the many mysteries on various topics concerning the universe and human mind.

***Darsana Mala*: Convergence of Diverse Philosophical Visions**

As a philosopher, *Darsana Mala* is valued as Sree Narayana Guru's most significant contribution to Indian philosophy. As the name of the book suggests in Sanskrit, *Darsana Mala* resembles a beautiful garland of philosophical visions linked together by the principle of *advaita* as the common thread. *Darsana Mala* systematically examines the unknown secrets of the universe and the purpose of life from various viewpoints of Vedanta. In the process, it establishes the primacy of *advaita* as the foremost spiritual truth. This book of poems in Sanskrit contains one hundred verses, arranged into ten chapters. Each chapter is founded on a specific philosophical thought-system for analyzing the fundamental questions of the seeker.

According to Prof. G. Balakrishnan Nair, who devoted his life to the study of Guru's philosophical works, *Darsana Mala* is a comprehensive summary of Vedanta philosophy from the *Upanishad* period to the time of Sri Sankara, the great Indian philosopher and theologian, extracted the philosophical doctrine of *advaita* from the ancient *Upanishad* literature. In principle, Guru accepted the doctrine of *advaita* espoused by Sankara as the defining principle of his philosophy. But he reinterpreted *advaita* and transformed the philosophical principle to be more meaningful, holistic and relevant to people and their lives.

Like the *rishis* of the *Upanishads*, Guru attempts to take the curious and serious readers to a journey through *Darsana Mala*

towards the realization of Truth that is perfect and eternal. The first chapter analyses the secrets of the universe from the viewpoint of the *Vedanta* logic termed *Adhya-ropa-darsanam*. According to *Vedanta*, seeing and experiencing something unreal as real is *Adhya-ropa-darsanam*. In a dream, the experiences seem real. Once the dream is over, the truth will set in.

The first verse establishes that before any creation including the universe came into being, there existed only God or *Brahman* in the form of eternal bliss. Afterwards, all creations appeared from the power of God's imagination. *Vedanta* calls *Brahman's* power of imagination or the creative force of *Brahman* as *maya*. So, the universe and the experiences appear as real because of the illusionary effect of *maya*. The first chapter firmly establishes that *Brahman* or the Supreme Consciousness is the only Reality. Everything else that appears to be real is *Brahman's* manifestations.

The last verse of *Darsana Mala* that appears in the tenth chapter again reiterates the truth of *Brahman*. It declares that nothing other than *Brahman* exists. A realized soul who knows this truth shall refrain from practicing any form of duality. Such a person accomplishes the goal of birth as a human being. The last chapter is titled *Nirvana Darsanam*. It defines *Nirvanam* or the ultimate liberation. According to *Upanishads*, *Nirvanam* must be acquired and experienced while alive. Only such persons who attain *Nirvana* during lifetime may experience this state of bliss after death also. Such a desire-free nature of the soul is the source of eternal ecstasy.

Vedanta Sutras: Another Monumental Contribution to Vedanta Philosophy

Sree Narayana Guru's Sanskrit text *Vedanta Sutras* is a unique book on the sublime principles of *Vedanta*, the essence of the *Upanishads*. *Vedanta Sutras* follows the pattern of the ancient text, the *Brahma Sutras*, by sage Badarayana. Badarayana (also known as Ved Vyasa) extracted the principles of the *Upanishads* and presented it systematically in *Brahma Sutras* almost three millenniums ago for future generations of seekers.

Like *Brahma Sutras*, Guru's *Vedanta Sutras* is made of concise philosophical statements in poetic style. While original text by Badarayana has more than five hundred *sutras* and is divided into four chapters, Guru's *Vedanta Sutras* has only twenty-four *sutras*. Each *sutra* consists of few words and makes a concise statement that is profoundly meaningful. It requires exceptional intellectual creativity and wisdom to generate such a work of philosophy in the traditional *sutra* style.

Many Indian philosophers including Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhwa have written commentaries on *Brahma Sutras*. They tried to interpret the intended messages of the original *sutras* in their own ways. Even though all of them based their interpretations on the single text, each of them produced a distinct and differing ideology in their critical studies. The prominent Indian philosophical school of thoughts known as *Adwaita*, *Dwaita* and *Vishishta-adwaita* resulted from the interpretations made by various scholar-philosophers on Badarayana's *Brahma Sutras*.

Unfortunately, interpretations on some of the *sutras* caused controversies during later periods. The subject of *Apa-Sudradhikaranam* (*Sutras* 34-38) is such a one. It was used to question the legitimacy and right of certain groups of people (*Sudras*) to learn and practice *Brahma Vidya* or spiritual science. Such manipulation on *Brahma Sutras* became a convenient tool for justifying the system of caste and the mistreatment based on birth. It has done tremendous damage to Indian social life.

Guru had many reasons to unravel the mysteries surrounding the original truths of *Upanishads*. But he did not try to write another commentary on *Brahma Sutras*. Rather, he decided to create his own *sutras* by drawing the wisdom of *Upanishads*. According to Swami Muni Narayana Prasad, by writing *Vedanta Sutras*, Guru recreated the uncontaminated wisdom of *Upanishads* in the modern context but in original style and purity. The emphasis of Guru's *Vedanta Sutras* is on clarity as it enlivens the original ideas of *Upanishads*. The new text by Guru is an attempt to confirm the possibilities of *sutras* as a genre to express the most sublime truths. He accomplished that by using the perfect words in Sanskrit

along with a matching syntax that make it impossible for future manipulations of the original ideas.

The significance of Guru's *Vedanta Sutras* is exemplified by the fact that no one in the Indian philosophical arena since Badarayana has written a book of *Sutras* defining the values of *Upanishad* teachings except Guru.

The first *sutra* in *Vedanta Sutras* is a declaration of the supreme principle of life. Knowing the true essence of life is defined as the perfect goal of each self. According to Vedanta philosophy each self is nothing but *Brahman*. So, it calls for the realization of "*Aham Brahmasi*" or attaining the conviction that "I am *Brahman*!" The second *sutra* deals with an inquiry on the nature of *atman* or individual soul. The third is an answer to the earlier one by stating that *atma* is nothing but an immense source of illumination. The fourth *sutra* explains that the whole universe is illuminated due to the true nature of individual soul. The fifth defines the truth of *Brahman* by saying *Brahman* exists in a dual state in the forms of reality and illusion. The sixth explains that the appearance of the duality of *Brahman* is a role played by *Brahman*. The seventh *sutra* dwells on the mystical nature of *Brahman* in the context of apparent dualities of the universe. The eighth reveals the secret of the universe. It states that the universe along with all its diverse manifestations originated from *Brahman* alone. The ninth and tenth *sutras* demonstrate the mutual interdependence of the various faculties of knowledge in perceiving the Truth.

The eleventh *sutra* is a call for realizing the non-dual nature or *advaita bhava* in everything to avoid negative ramifications of duality. The twelfth reiterates the profound *advaita* principle that "I am Brahman" and the whole universe is also Brahman. The thirteenth is requiring self-introspection to realize the true nature of our own self. The fourteenth *sutra* is a statement of causation. The fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth *sutras* are guidelines on perfecting the principle of *advaita* as a living truth. These *sutras* suggest that perceiving and experiencing all as an extension of self will lead to the realization of Brahman.

Sutras eighteen to twenty-two logically establish that since only soul is real, what is real can be only *atman*. *Sutra* twenty-three states that there exists nothing other than *atman*. The twenty-fourth and the last *sutra* says that since nothing exists other than *atman*, nothing ever existed other than *Brahman*.

Homa Mantra-. New Model for Ancient Ritual

What is Mantra?

Sree Narayana Guru's final addition to his collection of writing is a small *mantra* of eight lines in Sanskrit. A *mantra* is a sacred sound consisting of a single word or a phrase for chanting repeatedly. *Matras* can lead one towards a meditative mood by calming and silencing the mind from the clutter of thoughts. Since ancient times, *mantras* have been a vital feature of Vedic religion for performing various rituals and sacrifices. Like yoga, *mantras* have gained wider acceptance in the western world. Their psychological and physical benefits have been acknowledged by the scientific community.

Homa Mantra

Homa Mantra was compiled by Guru in 1925 as a simplified model for conducting the ancient *tantric* fire ritual. Traditionally, *Homa* is a time consuming and expensive ceremony. Because of the complexity involved in performing it, usually only experienced priests conduct the ritual. To satisfy their spiritual needs, even poor people are not averse to spending large sums of money for rituals such as *Homa*. Guru's intention was to provide people with an option so that they could not only save time and money but also perform it themselves.

Homa Mantra is distinctive because it is simple while preserving the original spiritual effects of the ritual. The whole ritual prescribed by Guru may take less than thirty minutes to perform. The ingredients required to conduct this may cost less than one hundred Indian rupees (equivalent to one and a half US dollars). The ritual constitutes offerings to fire. The only ingredients needed are a little ghee, a few ounces of sesame seeds, handfull of sliced dry coconut core and a few pounds of firewood traditionally made from jackfruit tree.

As we follow Guru's socio-religious reformation during the four decades of his public life, he never refrained from dissuading people from pursuing superstitious or meaningless acts. However, Guru did not try to undermine the *tantric* ritual of *Homa* as a superstition. Guru encouraged the ceremony in a more simplified form. In Sivagiri Ashram, this ritual takes place every day before dawn ever since the ceremony began as part of the daily schedule while Guru was alive.

The *Homa* ritual has its roots in the ancient Vedic culture. Later Buddhism and Jainism incorporated it into their ritualistic traditions. This sacrificial ritual has an important role in the religious ceremonies of most Hindus. The proponents of rituals like *Homa* and *Yagna* advocate a range of positive benefits to the immediate environment as well as to the cosmos. They also tout the scientific benefits of various types of *Homa*.

Rituals such as *Homa* are components of the *Tantric* branch of Indian spirituality while *Vedanta* or *Advaita* is its other extreme. Guru was known to be a constituent of the *Advaita* School of spirituality. *Advaita* is the abstract principle that permeates each of the other

schools of thought. Its goal is attaining non-duality with *Brahman*. In practical terms, it means the feeling of genuine oneness not only with fellow human beings but also with the whole of creation. *Vedanta* considers this realization as the foremost destination of every human. A mental state of complete renunciation is a prerequisite for experiencing that realization. Clearly only a very few are capable of renouncing material lure in its entirety for the realization of such a state of mind.

On the other hand, the *tantric* school advocates a more popular path to salvation. To the many who perform rituals such as this, their primary goal is to please the gods and the subtle forces of the cosmos. They believe this sacrificial ritual may provide them material welfare along with providing divine protection. Ancient *rishis* devised a key concept, *Purushartha*, as an ideal goal of every human being. According to this notion of *Chatur Purushartha*, the four goals of individuals are *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*. Thus righteousness, material prosperity, satisfaction of desires and then liberation are valued as the four phases in the hierarchy of human life.

By satisfying one's material desires in a dharmic way, one can also gradually attain a state of detachment. Cultivating a philosophical mental frame of "attachment with detachment" or "action in inaction" is a prerequisite for the successful conduct of life through these various stages. Rituals such as *Homa* were devised by the *rishis* to help individuals to stay on a righteous path.

Guru was a pragmatic spiritualist. He was convinced of the *satvic* or positive nature of *Homa* ritual. He acknowledged the therapeutic effects it had on people's minds. As the Sacred Fire or *Agni* consumes all impurities without discrimination, the fire ritual symbolically prompts the participants to offer their inner stains into the fire through a regular and conscious process.

It helps them to build a clear conscience while cultivating a ritualistic discipline in the lives of individuals who practice it. It can be taken as a proactive exercise for self-renewal as it allows the practitioner to relieve the accumulated baggages of the mind through a systemantic mental process. By its innate nature, the human mind usually panders to negative thoughts and feelings. It

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requires conscious efforts to maintain a positive mental attitude. The *Homa* ritual can be interpreted as a spiritually-induced stress release mechanism.

The following is the transliteration of the *Homa Mantra*:

Ohm

Agnea thava yathe-jasthath Brahmam

Atasthwam prathaiksham Brahmasi

Twatheeyaa Indriyaani mano

Buddhirithi saptha-jihwaa:

Twayi vishayaa ithi samithoo juhoemi

Aham i-thyajyam juhoemi

Twam na praseedha praseedha

Sreyaccha preayaccha prayaccha swaaha

Ohm Shanthi Shanthi Shanthi.

The following is my translation of the Homa Mantra:

"O' *Agni*, the Fire god!

Your glow is that of *Brahma*, the Supreme God!

So, You are the manifestation of *Brahma*.

You have seven divine tongues,

The five senses of Knowledge

Along with mind and intellect.

Into Your tongues of fire

Let me offer all objects of the mind,

In the form of these sesame seeds.

And the ghee that I offer

Is nothing but Me.

Bless me in abundance with your grace

With all the bounties; spiritual and temporal.

Glory to you too! O'Mother goddess!

Story behind Homa Ritual in Sivagiri

The *Tantric* and *Vedic* rituals began in the Sivagiri Ashram while Guru was alive. He ordained an expert in the field for leading the ritual and to guide other inmates in the Ashram. Surprisingly, this individual dramatically presented himself one day before Guru, took sanyasa from him and then engaged in the service of the sage for the next several years. He and his trained disciples were responsible for conducting the daily *Homa* sacrifice in Sivagiri. They also sanctified numerous temples across Kerala and in the other states. He was Sankaran Paradeshi. In Kerala, there is a huge network of *tantrics*, experts in *tantric* rituals, who acknowledge their allegiance to both Sankaran Paradeshi and to Sivagiri Ashram.

While Guru was resting one morning at Aruvippuram, the site of the first Shiva temple consecrated by him, a young boy rushed towards him pushing through the crowd of devotees. The incident took place somewhere around 1890. The boy was around sixteen years of age. Anyway, the boy stayed close to Guru while everyone in the crowd was awaiting Guru's reaction to his unruly behaviour. He prostrated before Guru, who acknowledged his submission. The boy lifted his face towards Guru and said, "Please bless me! Kindly ordain me into sanyasa." Guru murmured, "Go to Kashi." Everyone present there thought Guru was upset. The boy took Guru's words seriously and immediately left the place.

The destination in the boy's mind was none other than Kashi. He had no money. Nothing was in his possession except firm faith in Guru's words. When he left the abode of Guru, he did not know where Kashi was. But he knew very well that with Guru's blessing he would reach there. So, he began the long and arduous journey. After travelling almost two thousand miles, Sankaran reached Kashi. Nobody knows how long it took for the young man to cover that long distance.

Kashi, on the banks of the Ganga, has been known as the spiritual capital of India since ancient times. It is the abode of Lord Shiva. Ascetics from all over India throng Kashi to lead a holy life. Besides, learned men regularly offer scholarly lessons on spiritual

and philosophical subjects. Tantric and Vedic rituals are performed in ashrams.

Gradually, Sankaran became close to a few students of Kashi Viswa Samskara College. The college offered courses on *Tantric* and *Vedic* rituals. Sankaran wanted to learn those rituals. The teachers of the institution were convinced by his desire to learn. But the problem was only Brahmins were permitted to learn *mantras* and rituals. He was not a Brahmin, and he told them the truth. He also said he was from Kodungallur, a place near Thrissur in north Kerala.

A solution to the problem was proposed by the *acharyas*. "If he is not a Brahmin, let us make him one." They performed a few rituals including the *upanayana* and turned him into a Brahmin. He was given a sacred thread to wear as a mark of his new identity. So, he stayed in Kashi for almost seventeen years and became proficient in all Vedic rituals and sacrificial ceremonies. Then, one morning, he suddenly remembered Guru and the incident that took place many years earlier. He had a realization of the purpose behind Guru's direction to him to go to Kashi. He shared his wish to return to Kerala to his friends and *acharyas*. After much persuasion, they gave him the permission on one condition: "Return to Kashi as soon as the mission is over."

Sankaran, now thirty-three years old, embarked on the long journey by foot to Kerala. After many weeks, he reached Sivagiri Ashram. A few hours before his arrival at the ashram, mysteriously, Guru began to make some preparations as if he was anticipating the arrival of a loyal disciple.

Guru told one of his disciples, "Get me a fresh pair of saffron robes."

On the way to Sivagiri, Sankaran removed the sacred thread he was wearing all these years. He wasn't sure how Guru was going to respond to such outward declarations.

Guru was waiting with the saffron robes in his hands when Sankaran arrived. Guru wanted to fulfill Sankaran's old wish. He came to Guru as a boy many years ago to receive sanyasa, and Guru knew that the right time had arrived. As soon as Sankaran reached Sivagiri Ashram, he prostrated at Guru's feet.

To the surprise of everyone around, Guru said in a loving tone, "O' Our Sankaran has come."

The spontaneous response of Guru, as if they knew each other all this time, astonished even Sankaran. He did not expect Guru to remember him after all these years. Their only meeting around seventeen long years earlier had not lasted more than a few moments.

Then Guru ceremoniously handed over the robes to him. "From now on you will be known as Swami Sankarananda," Guru said.

After three or four days, Sankarananda Swami went to Guru for permission to return to Kashi. Guru told him, "Your next mission is not in Kashi but here. You must take the responsibility to teach the inmates and other prospective students the Vedic and Tantric rituals you learned in Kashi." Soon the *Vaidic Mutt* in Sivagiri was built under Guru's direction and with the active supervision of Sankarananda Swami.

While Guru was attentively watching, Sankarananda Swami would sit on a mat on the veranda of the *Vaidic Mutt* and teach the inmates *mantras* and rituals he knew. Sometimes Guru would intervene and prohibit Sankarananda Swami from teaching certain *mantras* and rituals that appeared as out of time or disagreeable. "Those are not required," Guru would say.

Guru deputed Sankarananda Swami to consecrate many temples across Kerala. He trained many spiritually oriented men the Vedic rituals he learned. When the *Sarada Mutt*, the Temple for the Goddess of Learning, was built, Sankarananda Swami supervised its construction.

It was in 1925 that Guru composed the *Homa Mantra*. Sankarananda Swami began using that *mantra* for conducting the fire ritual in Sivagiri. His disciples and their disciples also to this day follow that practice. Sankarananda Swami eventually returned to Kashi, and spent the rest of his life there. He was known to have built numerous Mutts and ashrams in and around Kashi.

End of an Era

Mahasamadhi of Sree Narayana Guru

It was in January 1928 that the people of Kerala began to hear about Guru's health problems. Even though everyone's body is subject to wear and tear, people had a hard time believing that Guru was getting weak and sick. Such was the belief in Guru's divinity and mystic prowess.

Guru's physical issues began in the form of urinary infections. Regardless of the supervision and treatment of medical professionals, the problem persisted and miraculously evaded their scrutiny. The news journals of those days were closely following the developments on Guru's health. They regularly published detailed reports on Guru's condition. People all over Kerala prayed with one mind for Guru's wellbeing and speedy recovery. From the royals to common folks, Guru's health became a main cause of concern.

For a while, Guru had been suffering now and then from some abdominal disease. The illness got serious while Guru was resting in his ashram at Vaikkom. So, Guru went to Aluva Advaita Ashram to rest. Hearing about Guru's illness, a steady stream of people began to pour into the ashram. Guru allowed everyone to reach him. Occasionally he cracked jokes to keep them in good spirits. On the request of T.K. Madhavan, General Secretary of S.N.D.P. Yogam, Guru attended a function in Kottayam on Sunday, January 15, 1928. He personally handed over registration certificates of S.N.D.P. Yogam's 108 new branches in the region. The next day, Guru visited *Nagambodom Temple* in Kottayam. It was on that occasion that Guru granted his permission for the *Sivagiri Pilgrimage*.

The Kottayam function was the last public event attended by Guru. After that, Guru went to his Velloor Mutt Ashram in Vaikkom and rested for another few days. Afterwards, Guru again returned to Aluva Advaita Ashram.

For the next eight to nine months, on the urging of physicians and close disciples, Guru was taken to various treatment centers in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Guru was given treatment in both modern and traditional medicines. To the dismay of everyone, the illness showed no signs of receding.

Besides the problem of passing urine, Guru was occasionally affected by serious body pain and lack of sleep. Even though Guru's body was weak and he was bedridden, his mental and spiritual faculties were sharp. Guru's facial expressions showed no signs of illness. As a perfect Yogi, Guru appeared as if he had overcome the realm of material suffering. On the morning of April 28, while Guru was in Sivagiri, Abraham Mar Thoma Metropolitan, a prominent religious head of a Christian denomination, visited Guru and had a lengthy conversation.

After a few trips for treatment, in the first week of June, Guru returned to Sivagiri for the last time. Then until *Mahasamadi*, Guru rested at his historic residence known as *Vaidika Mutt* in Sivagiri Ashram. Devotees and dignitaries thronged Sivagiri Ashram, longing for a few moments with Guru. Regardless of all medical complications, Guru seemed at peace all the time. He rendered words of wisdom and personal advice to the needy.

Guru knew in his heart that a few more important events had to be taken place before leaving the mortal body. During one of those days, Guru had sent a letter to Ananda Shenoy, a Brahmin youth who dedicated his life for the uplift of Dalits, to reach Sivagiri at the earliest. So, Shenoy left for the Sivagiri ashram on July 31. By the time he reached the ashram, it was too late to meet Guru. As the youth went to meet Guru early next morning, he was greeted with a warm smile. "Oh! You have come!" Guru said.

Guru was weak but his soft words were filled with enthusiasm. Guru was preparing for the last but an impactful spiritual act. The sage instructed his disciples to arrange for the anointing ceremony of Ananda Shenoy as his last disciple. On August 3, Guru was taken on his bed to the Sarada Mutt for the brief ceremony. He then formally admitted Ananda Shenoy to his ascetic organization, the *Sree Narayana Dharma Sangom*. Upon giving him *sanyasa*, Guru named him Swami Ananda Theerthar.

Even though Guru was ill, devotees still believed in his power to cure the sick. So, the sick continued to come in. Though weak, everyone was received by Guru with compassion. On receiving a piece of sweet, a banana or little water from Guru, miraculously, many sick people felt cured from diseases.

A young girl was brought from Vakkom village near Thiruvananthapuram by her father Nambavilakathu Marthandan and other relatives. She was suffering from serious mental problems. As a result, she had been in deep depression most of the time. She lost the power of speech and was almost crippled. As she was carried into Guru's room, the sage looked at the helpless girl with compassion. Guru simply told her to get up and walk. She obeyed Guru's words as if nothing was wrong with her. She also answered a few of Guru's inquiries. According to a report in the news journal *Dharmam*, Bhageerathi, the girl who was brought to Sivagiri as a bedridden patient, returned home happily with her family as a normal person. After some years, Bhageerathi got married, gave birth to a few children and led a happy life.

To the physicians monitoring Guru, his health was deteriorating day by day. But from Guru's appearance no one could detect the

seriousness of his illness. He was calm and composed. An aura of mystic beauty and serenity emanated from his glowing face. From Guru's physical appearance, many hoped that the dark days were over. There were no signs of physical pain. Guru's eyes and looks had become sharp. "I feel infinite peace and bliss", Guru said in a low voice. Guru then advised the disciples, who were at his bedside day and night, to recite *Daivadasakam* and *Isa Vasyopanishad*.

On September 18, Guru suddenly stopped talking. Yet Guru was in full consciousness. Everything remained the same for the next two days. On Thursday, September 20, the atmosphere became gloomy since early morning. Because of the light rain, the earth remained wet. Fine drops of water were falling like the tears from the sky.

Kunjuraman who later became the Mayor of Thiruvananthapuram, was an inmate of Sivagiri Ashram and a student at Sivagiri High School. On September 20, Kunjuraman went to school in the morning but his mind was filled with the thoughts of Guru. It seemed to him that Guru's mortal departure was imminent. At lunch break, he left the school and ran towards the Sivagiri Ashram to be closer to Guru.

By the time Kunjuraman reached the ashram, the area was filled with a large crowd. Guru's close disciples and devotees, common people and leaders from all walks of life were gathered around Vaidic Mutt where Guru was staying. The young Kunjuraman entered the room to be near Guru's bed. To his surprise, Kunjuraman did not find any trace of pain on Guru's face. So, he returned to school with the hope that Guru was well. While attending the classes, however, he was haunted by some mysterious uneasiness. So, he left again. By the time he reached the ashram, the place was filled with tens of thousands of people. Everyone was anxiously awaiting word on Guru.

Miraculously, Guru regained the power of speech and directed his disciple Bodhananda Swami to recite *Daivadasakam*, the universal prayer written by Guru. Under direction, another disciple, Vidyananda Swami, began to read the chapter of *Jeevan-Mukthi* from *Yoga-vasishtam*, a classic book of Vedanta which talks about the liberation of the soul.

Bhargavan Vaidyer, who was an inmate of the ashram, was there to witness Guru's final moments. He later shared that experience in writing: "At that time, I was by the bedside of Swami. Swami said in a soft voice that he was experiencing perfect contentment. Suddenly, Swami got up and sat in *padmasana*, a yoga posture, closed his eyes for a few seconds, opened and lifted the eyes upwards and took a deep breath. Swami's body vibrated lightly for a few seconds and then became still."

Transition to Eternal Bliss

According to Indian spiritual traditions, *Mahasamadhi* is used to denote the purposeful and conscious act of a yogi to finally liberate his soul from the body. On the other hand, *samadhi* is the result of yogi's occasional acts of entering into a state of bliss for a limited period of time. An enlightened yogi has the unique ability to enter into such a state of infinite bliss of *samadhi* by controlling and overcoming all movements of the mind through meditation.

During this transcendental experience, a yogi is liberated from the constraints of time and space. Then the yogi's individual consciousness enters the realms of the universal consciousness. It is believed that while in *samadhi* a yogi will have access to the truths about everything including the hidden secrets of the universe. Often, they share this intuitive wisdom and metaphysical experiences through poetic verses or prophetic revelations for the benefit of humanity. Also, a yogi can return to normal consciousness at will after experiencing

such occasional and temporary states of *samadhi*. But *Mahasamadhi* is the final and permanent act of voluntarily entering into this state of infinite bliss by merging with the universal Consciousness. Thus, the soul of the yogi is liberated permanently from the body.

The ascetic personalities through higher realms of contemplation may experience the perfect state of *advaita* or non-duality. Such personalities are beyond any sense of individuality. To them, the material world and its parameters have no role to play in their mind. They perceive all beings as their own extensions and feel the diverse facets of creations as shadow of their own self. They remain eternally in ecstasy unaffected by the sway of the physical world and its influences. Such persons live every moment with the knowledge that there is nothing but *Brahma* or God existing in the universe. To them, birth, life and death do not matter. As we described above, only such great souls can enter into the state of *samadhi*, the process of entering and leaving the plateau of higher consciousness at will. Attaining of *Mahasamadhi*, the voluntary and final retirement from material world, is possible only for such super yogic personalities. Sage Sree Narayana Guru was such a rare yogi.

An Entire Region Mourns

Soon the news of Guru's *Mahasamadhi* spread to the crowd gathered in and around Sivagiri Ashram. From there, the shocking revelation spread like wild fire to the entire region through all available sources including word of mouth, telegrams and news media. The grief was unbearable to many. People from all walks of life plunged into mourning. Devotees thronged temples and other houses of worship to conduct special ceremonies to relieve their sorrow and anguish. It was unbelievable to them that the great sage who had lived among them for seven decades was no more. In Kerala's history until then, no other individual had ever wielded so much reverence, influence, love and admiration like that of Sree Narayana Guru.

The whole region was at a standstill as the sanyasin disciples at Sivagiri Ashram prepared for the burial the next day. The government gave permission to close schools across Travancore to let people participate in the ceremonies. The doors of many places of work also

remained closed that day. Guru's disciples, other sanyasis, inmates of the ashram along with countless devotees observed a day of fasting.

On the morning of September 21, Guru's body, decorated with flowers and garlands, was placed at *Vaidic Mutt* in Sivagiri which had been Guru's residence for many years. Special ceremonies accompanied by prayers were conducted there until noon. Since morning thousands of people poured into Sivagiri to have a *darsan* of Guru's body for the last time. Around noon, Guru's body was taken in a procession accompanied by ceremonial music and prayers to another site at Sivagiri known as *Vanajakshi Mandapam* for the public to pay their homage.

In the evening, the body was taken again in a procession to the very top of the Sivagiri hills. Honoring Guru's wish, a specific spot at the hilltop had already been prepared as his mortal resting place. In the presence of tens of thousands of people, amid a sea of grief, Guru's body was placed in a seated position into a large pit. That is the tradition for burying yogis. The body was then covered by flowers and with ceremonial objects such as camphor, sandalwood and holy ashes. A vast number of devotees—many in tears—spent the whole night in prayer.

On the morning of September 22, hours before sunrise, at *Brahma Muhurtham*, amid chants of prayers, Guru's tomb was covered with a large stone that was specifically cut for the purpose. For the next forty-five days, prayers continued at the burial site. With the support of many philanthropic individuals, free food was offered for all those visiting and participating in the auspicious ceremony.

While the extended ceremonies were going on, Sivagiri was flooded with condolence messages. The Queen of Travancore expressed her condolences in touching words through Diwan Watts, the royal Prime Minister of British origin. Watts was very close to Guru. Reminiscing his own personal experiences, the Diwan also offered his deep condolences. All newspapers in Kerala published emotional eulogies and expressed their sense of loss. It was truly the end of an era.

An Eloquent Eulogy

An inspiring eulogy was issued by *Brahma Vidya Sangom* through its publication, *the Sanathana Dharma*. *Brahma Vidya Sangom* is a global body for the propagation of peace and fraternity among diverse group of people. The following statement appeared originally in *Sanathana Dharma* after Guru's Mahasamadhi. It was later quoted by numerous biographers of Guru. I have taken it from the English translation of the biography published by Murkkoth Kumaran, a contemporary of Guru.

"The land of Kerala is darkened as their saint who sheds eternal light is gone. That serene equanimous life came to an end on 20th September.

Sree Narayana Guru has secured an altar of adoration in the hearts of the people of Kerala just as the great sons of Kerala, Adi Shankaracharya and Thunchathu Ezhuthachan had secured. Adi Shankara was harassed by his contemporaries. Thunchan became a

person to be respected much after his times. But the Swami (*referring to Guru reverently in popular terms*), during his lifetime itself became the recipient of universal, everlasting, high reverence. Such respect no one in India has received in recent centuries.

Once in a millennium, bold souls who through their daring actions liberate enslaved human beings from their serfdom are born among them. It is the way of the world that through these men command universal respect, sometimes they face danger and dishonor too. The Swami's life is an example to illustrate this. The suffering his physical body was subjected to in the end, could be explained only as an atonement to the sins his community must have committed in their previous births. The Swami has revealed, through the last stages of his life, the esoteric spiritual principle that the sins of others are washed off by the blood of virtuous souls.

He taught the downtrodden people how to elevate themselves. At the same time he advocated the unique principle that total liberation of the society from the evil spell of caste, is possible only if the ghost of caste is completely exorcised from the minds of the low caste and high castes as they both are caught in this vicious cycle of illusion. To understand this seems to be difficult even for his own disciples.

He installed temples for the people who did not have temples. When he saw that the deities in his temples are also showing human frailties, he advised the people to forget caste and religion and worship the Supreme Soul which expresses itself as many beings in this great temple of the world.

Some people say that he was a Guru of *Thiyyas* (*colloquial term for Ezhavas in the Malabar region*). He had not taken only *Thiyyas* as his ascetic disciples by conferring **sanyasa Deeksha*'. But *Nairs, Brahmins, Thiyyas* and some Europeans also have accepted him as their 'Guru' and opted to become his disciples. Today, no one except Gandhiji has similar followers. The Swami had not given platform speeches, nor talked much. But just like the sun spreading light, by his mere presence the Swami spread beams of love and strength. Just like the spirit Of Sree Ramakrishna converted Narendra into Swami Vivekananda, the spirit of Sree Narayana had converted a number of Narendras into great orators. That elixir of love flowing from him had changed bitter enmity into loyal friendships. That self-effulgent

light from the divine face had cleared all doubts in many. His sense of sacrifice had explained the mystery of *Karma Yoga* to many.

For the enlightened Kerala, he was Patanjali in yoga, Adi Shankara in wisdom, Manu in the art of administration, Buddha in sacrifice, (Muhammad) Nabi in perseverance, and Jesus in humility. The Holy Saint Sree Narayana played the human role for 73 years, and then returned to his heavenly abode. He had received increasing reputation and never-ending respect and devotion of the virtuous, which are the due of a true spiritualist. When all these were at the peak, that great soul left the ambience of this world and entered everlasting life. His image engraved in the hearts of thousands, his institutions in the service of mankind, and the noble Sivagiri remain as symbols of his perennial wisdom. Those who have seen that radiant face, and heard those wise and witty words, will tell the story of that deep love for humanity and the actions with regenerative force. Let history proclaim all these. In future India, he will be worshipped as a deity along with incarnations and holy saints."

Mahasamadhi Mandapa at Sivagiri

It has been a common practice among many cultures to build monuments for great men and women as a mark of honour. But rarely among such structures exists a monument similar to the one that was built in Sivagiri by a lone devotee out of pure devotion to a humble sage. The story of the magnificent *mandapa* or tower at the burial site of Sree Narayana Guru on the Sivagiri Hill is unique in many ways.

The graceful monument, popularly known as *Mahasamadhi Mandapa*, was dedicated to the public on January 1, 1968 by Dr Zakir Hussain, then President of India. Since then millions have visited the shrine. The round and tall structure of seventy-four feet was designed by L.M. Chittala, a prominent architect from Chennai. Later Chittala was honoured by the government of India in recognition of

his contributions to the field of architecture and was awarded the prestigious *Padmabhushan*.

The monument hosts a beautiful statue of Guru which was consecrated on January 1, 1968 by Swami Sankarananda, head of the Sivagiri Mutt. The ceremony took place amid devotional chants of '*Narayana moorthea—Guru Narayana moorthea*' by thousands of devotees. The statue was carved in marble by eminent artist Pashupathi Natha Mukharji of Varanasi (Kashi).

Since his *Mahasamadhi*, disciples and devotees had cherished the dream of building a monument where Guru's mortal remains were placed. It took a few decades for the sanyasins of Sivagiri Ashram to actively begin the project. Their hope faded soon as they found that the huge funds necessary for the project were not forthcoming. As the project was facing a financial crunch, an individual came forward to sponsor the whole project. His name was M.P. Moothedom. He was a private construction contractor of Indian Railways. It was one of the largest philanthropic acts in Kerala's history.

Moothedom was not born rich but was a self-made entrepreneur. After finishing high school, he did petty jobs. His parents were devotees of Guru, who had visited their family home a few times. Once the young man went to Aluva Advaita Ashram to seek Guru's blessings. He was about to bid for a major railway track construction project.

Moothedom devotionally presented to Guru five silver coins on a palm leaf as *dakshina* or a humble ceremonial offering. He then sought Guru's permission to begin his new career as a public construction contractor. Guru listened to him, and like a management expert, gave him advice on how to undertake the project and how to deal with workers. Guru took three silver coins in his hands, kept them for a few moments and then placed them in Moothedom's right palm. Guru then said, "Whatever belong to you let me keep it. Whatever is mine you keep it." Feeling inspired after receiving Guru's blessings, Moothedom took the three silver coins home, wrapped them in a piece of linen and placed them in a sacred place in his home—untouched for the rest of his life. He then went on to bag project after project in the construction field. Within a few decades, Moothedom earned

recognition as an accomplished entrepreneur in southern India and became very rich.

When Moothedom came to know about the *Mandapa* proposal, he offered all help. He immediately contributed a moderate amount of money his late father saved for donating at the right time for the purpose. When the fundraising was not progressing as everyone had anticipated, Swami Geethananda of Sivagiri Mutt approached him for help. To the surprise of everyone, Moothedom happily consented to sponsor the whole project himself. Even though he faced severe financial crunch during many stages of the construction, the project never slowed down and was completed on time. After the Mandapa was completed, the sayasins offered to carve his name on a piece of marble as a mark of recognition for his huge donation but Moothedom strongly objected. The humble man wanted his service to be treated as a *Guru daskshina*, a simple devotional offering.

Guru's Global Messengers

Unfortunately, Sree Narayana Guru had only a few messengers who were able to reach out to the world effectively and efficiently outside of southern India in comparison to many of his spiritual contemporaries like sage Ramakrishna who was the guru of Swami Vivekananda. The fact remains true even years after the launch of Guru's historic mission more than one and a quarter century ago at Aruvippuram.

Anyway, the contributions of those pioneer disciples who devoted their lives to spread the message and philosophy of Guru deserve special mention.

Nataraja Guru, an extraordinary genius and scholar, took the philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru to Europe. He was the son of Dr Palpu, the prominent social activist and a loyal lieutenant of Guru. Guru found in Nataraja a promising messenger of his movement when Nataraja was not even thinking about such a possibility.

Narayana Gurukulam, the monastic institution founded by Nataraja Guru in 1923, was instrumental in teaching and interpreting Guru's philosophy and poetical revelations around the world. Having total confidence in his potential, Nataraja Guru was sent to Europe by Guru in 1928 for advance education. Nataraja Guru joined the University of Sorbonne in Paris and took a D. Litt after five years of research study in Education. While in Europe, Nataraja Guru contributed greatly to the propagation of Sree Narayana philosophy. He published many articles and books and translated into English the major works of Guru.

Nataraja Guru published *The Word of the Guru* in 1952 on the life and teachings of Guru. He wrote *An Integrated Science of the Absolute* as a commentary of Guru's *Darsanamala*. *Atmopadesha Satakam*, another masterpiece of Sree Narayana Guru, was commented on by Nataraja Guru as *One Hundred Verses of Self-Instructions*. Nataraja Guru also rendered a commentary on Bhagavat Gita.

John Spiers, who was born in Scotland, was an admirer of India and came to the strange land when he was twenty-three years old. While in India in 1937, Spiers read a book by Nataraja Guru published in Geneva. According to Spiers, it was the influence of that "slender little book" on Guru that he decided to become a disciple of Nataraja Guru. Under the guidance of Nataraja Guru, Spiers began to publish *VALUES*, a global journal on the philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru. Spiers wrote many articles on the teachings of Guru. A few of these insights were included in his books *Guru: The Unknown* and *What shall I read*.

The invaluable contributions of Guru Nitya Chaithanya Yati in propagating Guru's philosophy deserve special mention. Guru Nitya Chaithanya Yati was another disciple of Nataraja Guru. He widely toured Europe and America in the 1970s. He was an authoritative scholar in many disciplines including Psychology, Philosophy and Education. He was the author of numerous books in English and Malayalam. He taught in universities in India, Europe and America. He was the spiritual head of Narayana Gurukulam, the monastic order founded by Nataraja Guru, until his demise in 1999.

Continuing Flow of Visitors and Pilgrims to Sivagiri

Rabindranath Tagore along with C.F. Andrews visited Guru at the Sivagiri Ashram on November 22, 1922. Mahatma Gandhi came to Sivagiri for the first time on March 12, 1925. Right after Gandhiji's visit, Diwan Watts, the royal prime minister of Travancore, visited Sivagiri. C. Rajagopalachari, India's first governor general of Indian origin came to Sivagiri and met Guru in 1925. Swami Shraddhanandaji of Arya Samaj came to Sivagiri in 1925 and had a long conversation with Guru. The social revolutionary and Dravidian leader E. V. Ramaswamy also visited Sivagiri in 1925 and had extensive discussions with Guru. Kerala's pioneering Dalit leader Ayyankali came to Sivagiri very often while he was a member of the royal legislature of Travancore to get advice from Guru on various social issues.

The triumvirate poets of modern Malayalam, Kumaran Asan, Ulloor Parameshwara Iyer and Vallathol Narayana Menon, were

frequent visitors to Guru and to the Sivagiri Ashram. During the time of Guru's sixtieth birthday, Vallathol composed a poem glorifying the ascetic virtues of Guru. Ulloor had a close association with Guru, and many times Ulloor was invited for meals with Guru at the ashram along with other inmates. Besides an accomplished poet, Ulloor also was a prominent royal administrator and a historian. Kumaran Asan was always a close disciple of Guru until his untimely demise in 1924.

A galaxy of political and national leaders, social reformers, intellectuals, and spiritual leaders and commoners from all over India and abroad continue to come to the Sivagiri Ashram as visitors and pilgrims. Acharya Vinoba Bhave visited Sivagiri in 1954 and stated that he revered Sree Narayana Guru as one among the five or ten holy personalities of India in the last one century. The former presidents of India including S. Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussain, R. Venkataraman, K.R. Narayanan and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam visited Sivagiri on various occasions.

Free India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Sivagiri on April 25, 1958, almost thirty years after the physical disappearance or Mahasamadhi of Sree Narayana Guru. He then wrote in the visitor's diary, "I am happy and privileged to come here and pay my tribute to a great man whose message is as vital and essential today as it was when he gave it." Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India, visited Sivagiri on three different occasions, and the purpose of her last trip to Kerala before her tragic death in 1984 was to inaugurate the annual Sivagiri pilgrimage of 1983.

Most recently, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism visited Sivagiri on November 24, 2012 as he formally inaugurated the 80th annual pilgrimage. A host of leaders representing various religions including Christian scholar and church leader Rev. Dr. Philippos Mar Chrysostom were present at the function. On the occasion, Dalai Lama said: "As a *chela* of India, I am very happy to see you uphold these great traditions of *ahimsa* and inter-religious harmony and respect. To come here and sit among these various religious leaders make me very happy. But as your Guru has taught, it is not enough to recite Sanskrit verses; we must reach out to the poor who need help and bring them education and health." Before leaving Sivagiri, Dalai Lama also planted a jackfruit tree in front of

the Vaidika Mutt where Guru attained *Maha-samadhi*.

Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, visited Sivagiri on December 15, 2015 and acknowledged that he derived the energy to serve the masses of India from the visions and philosophical messages of Sree Narayana Guru. His earlier visit to Sivagiri was in April 2013 while he was the Chief Minister of the State of Gujarat, and made an elaborate speech on his understanding of Sree Narayana Guru while inaugurating the annual *Sree Narayana Dharma Meemamsa Parishad*, a conclave for the study of spiritual and philosophical teachings of Guru. During the pilgrimage season of 2015, political leaders from a diverse background including Sonia Gandhi of the Indian National Congress, Sitaram Yechury of the Communist Party of India (M) and Oommen Chandy, Chief Minister of Kerala, as well as Mano Ganeshan, a Minister of the Sree Lankan government, V. Shanmughanathan, Governor of the state of Meghalaya and Hamid Ansari, Vice President of India were among the long list of dignitaries.

While I was in Sivagiri during the evening hours on February 20, 2013, three unique visitors came to the ashram for the first time. The group consisted of two young ladies and an infant. The ladies were from Russia, and from a village named Karelia near St. Petersburg. Both ladies had the same first name as Natalia, and the infant girl's name was Keera. They were visiting Kerala and somehow heard about Sree Narayana Guru, and then decided to visit the ashram. They spent an hour in the ashram experiencing its spiritual beauty and serenity. I had the opportunity to share with them a few thoughts on Guru, and they attentively listened to my words. Now Sivagiri experiences a continuous stream of visitors throughout the year from all regions of India as well as from many nations around the world.

Works of Sree Narayana Guru

Malayalam (Poems)

- 1- *Shanmukha Stotram*
2. *Shanmukha Dasakam*
3. *Subrahmany Keerthanam*
Navamanjari
5. *Devi Stotram*
- 6- *Mannthala Devi Stavam*
- 7' *Kali Natakam*
8. *Sivaprasada Panchakam*
- 9- *Sadasiva Darsanam*
10. *Siva Sathakam*
11. *Ardhanareeswara Stavam*

12. *Mananattheetham* (Vairagya Darsanam)
13. *Chijjada Chinthanam*
14. *Kundalinippattu*
15. *Pindanandi*
16. *Indriya Vairagyam*
17. *Sivasthavam*
18. *Advaita Deepika*
19. *Atmopadesa-sathakam*
20. *Jananee Navaratna Manjari*
21. *Jeevakarunya Panchakam*
22. *Anukampa Dasakam*
23. *Dathapaharam*
24. *Jati Nimayam* (First verse in Sanskrit and remaining 5 verses in Malayalam)
25. *Arivu*
26. *Kolatheeresa Stavam*
27. *Swanubhavageethi*
28. *Jathi Lakshanam*
29. *Daivadasakam*
30. *Sadacharam*
31. *Bharyadharmam*
32. *Ahimsa*
33. *Sree Krishandarsanam*
34. *Mangalasamsa*

Malayalam (Prose)

35. *Chijjadachindakam*
36. *Daivachinthanam I*
37. *Daivachinthanam II*
38. *Atmavilasam*
39. *Gadyaprarthana*

Translations

- 40. *Tirukkural* (from Tamil)
- 41. *Isavasyopanishad* (from Sanskrit)

Sanskrit (Poems)

- 42. *Vinayakashtakam*
- 43. *Sree Vasudevashtakam*
- 44. *Guhashtakam*
- 45. *Bahuleyashtakam*
- 46. *Bhadrakalyashtakam*
- 47. *Chidambarashtakam*
- 48. *Shanmaturasthavam*
- 49. *Brahmavidyapanchakam*
- 50. *Municharyapanchakam*
- 51. *Darsanamala*
- 52. *Asramam*
- 53. *Nirvrithipanchakam*
- 54. *Slokatrayi*
- 55. *Vishnuashtakam*
- 56. *Dharmam*
- 57. *Homamantram*
- 58. *Samadhislokangal*

Sanskrit (Prose)

- 59. *Vedantasutrangal*

Tamil (Poems)

- 60. *Tevarapathikamgal*
- 61. *A Tamil Verse* (This is the translation of the first stanza of Kalidasa's *Gangashtakam*)

Milestones in the Life of the Guru

1855	Born on August 28 th at Chempazhanthu near Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, India
1860-71	Primary education
1877-79	Higher studies
1879-81	Teaching at various places
1882	Attempts to free himself from worldly affairs. Began travelling to places far and near.
1883-88	After father's death, left home permanently. Met Thycad Ayyavu, a great teacher of yoga who influenced his later life to a great extent. Got acquainted with Chattampi Swamikal. Performed penance at Maruthwamala, a mountain in the southernmost part of India. Attained enlightenment. Later reached Aruvippuram and performed contemplation in its caves. Slowly came to the attention of the public.

- 1888 Aruvippuram consecration. Began composition of hymns and philosophical poems. In later years gave expression to his vision of truth through this medium, which comes to more than sixty in numbers.
- 1891 Met young Kumaran from Kayikkara who later became one of the foremost disciples and the poet laureate of Kerala
- 1901 The public started recognizing the role of the Guru. State census of that time records him as a good Sanskrit scholar and pious religious reformer
- 1903 An organization known as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (popularly known as S.N.D.P. Yogam) was started under his tutelage
- 1904 Found the Sivagiri Ashram. Accelerated the process of consecrating temples at various parts of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (about 75 in total).
- 1912 Consecrating of Sarada Temple at Sivagiri (May 1st)
- 1914 Established Advaita Ashramam at Aluva
- 1916 Widespread celebration of the 60th birthday
- 1918 First visit to Sri Lanka
- 1921 Conference of brotherhood at Aluva, a creative attempt to strike down the barriers of caste
- 1922 Nobel laureate Rabindra Nath visited the Sivagiri Ashram and met Guru
- 1924 Conference of all religions at Aluva, first of its kind in Asia. Poet Kumaranasan's tragic death
- 1924-25 *Vaikkom Sathyagraham*, a peaceful agitation for securing the freedom of movement in public streets for lower castes.

- 1925 Mahatma Gandhi visited Sivagiri and met Guru.
In Sivagiri, Guru laid the foundation stone for
Brahma Vidyalaya which was envisioned as an ideal
educational institution to the study of all religions of
the world in equal spirit.
- 1926 Second visit to Sri Lanka
- 1928 Established Sree Narayana Dharma Sanghom, the
monastic order (on 11th January)
Attained mahasamadhi at Sivagiri on September 20th
at 3.30 p.m.

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